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Edited by David Konstan
and Kurt A. Raaflaub

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 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2010
© 2010 Blackwell Publishing Ltd

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ,
United Kingdom

Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148–5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Epic and history / edited by David Konstan and Kurt A. Raaflaub.

p. cm. – (The ancient world, comparative histories)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4051-9307-8 (alk. paper)

1. Epic literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature and history. 3. History in literature.

I. Konstan, David. II. Raaflaub, Kurt A.

PN56.E65E645 2010

809.1'32—dc22

2009018579

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 10/13pt Galliard by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Printed in Singapore

I 2010

Contents

List of Figures and Tables	vii
Notes on Contributors	viii
Series Editor's Preface	xiv
1 Introduction <i>David Konstan and Kurt A. Raaflaub</i>	1
2 Maybe Epic: The Origins and Reception of Sumerian Heroic Poetry <i>Piotr Michalowski</i>	7
3 Historical Events and the Process of Their Transformation in Akkadian Heroic Traditions <i>Joan Goodnick Westenholz</i>	26
4 Epic and History in Hittite Anatolia: In Search of a Local Hero <i>Amir Gilan</i>	51
5 Manly Deeds: Hittite Admonitory History and Eastern Mediterranean Didactic Epic <i>Mary R. Bachvarova</i>	66
6 Epic and History in the Hebrew Bible: Definitions, "Ethnic Genres," and the Challenges of Cultural Identity in the Biblical Book of Judges <i>Susan Niditch</i>	86
7 No Contest between Memory and Invention: The Invention of the Pāṇḍava Heroes of the <i>Mahābhārata</i> <i>James L. Fitzgerald</i>	103
8 From "Imperishable Glory" to History: The <i>Iliad</i> and the Trojan War <i>Jonas Grethlein</i>	122
9 Historical Narrative in Archaic and Early Classical Greek Elegy <i>Ewen Bowie</i>	145

10	Fact, Fiction, and Form in Early Roman Epic <i>Sander M. Goldberg</i>	167
11	The Song and the Sword: Silius's <i>Punica</i> and the Crisis of Early Imperial Epic <i>Raymond D. Marks</i>	185
12	The Burden of Mortality: Alexander and the Dead in Persian Epic and Beyond <i>Olga M. Davidson</i>	212
13	Slavic Epic: Past Tales and Present Myths <i>Susana Torres Prieto</i>	223
14	Historicity and Anachronism in <i>Beowulf</i> <i>Geoffrey Russom</i>	243
15	The <i>Nibelungenlied</i> – Myth and History: A Middle High German Epic Poem at the Crossroads of Past and Present, Despair and Hope <i>Albrecht Classen</i>	262
16	Medieval Epic and History in the Romance Literatures <i>Joseph J. Duggan</i>	280
17	Roland's Migration from Anglo-Norman Epic to Royal French Chronicle History <i>Michel-André Bossy</i>	293
18	A Recurrent Theme of the Spanish Medieval Epic: Complaints and Laments by Noble Women <i>Mercedes Vaquero</i>	310
19	History in Medieval Scandinavian Heroic Literature and the Northwest European Context <i>Robert D. Fulk</i>	328
20	Traditional History in South Slavic Oral Epic <i>John Miles Foley</i>	347
21	Lord Five Thunder and the 12 Eagles and Jaguars of Rabinal Meet Charlemagne and the 12 Knights of France <i>Dennis Tedlock</i>	362
22	History, Myth, and Social Function in Southern African Nguni Praise Poetry <i>Richard Whitaker</i>	381
23	Epic and History in the Arabic Tradition <i>Dwight F. Reynolds</i>	392
24	Comments on "Epic and History" <i>Dean Miller</i>	411
	Index	425

List of Figures and Tables

Figures

Figure 2.1	Map of Mesopotamia: Major Old Babylonian literary text finds	10
Figure 21.1	The opening performance of <i>Rabinal Achi</i> in the 1999 season	366
Figure 21.2	Two trumpeters and a drummer, playing the dance music for <i>Rabinal Achi</i>	367
Figure 21.3	Kaweq in <i>Rabinal Achi</i> and an ancient lord of Palenque	368

Tables

Table 2.1	Six <i>Gilgamesh</i> tales used in the old Babylonian schools	18
Table 9.1	Narrative elegies that might have been composed around 700, as well as elegies attested to have been composed around 650	156
Table 11.1	Roman republican and early imperial epics	200

Notes on Contributors

Mary R. Bachvarova received her PhD from the University of Chicago's Committee on the History of Culture. She is Associate Professor of Classics at Willamette University. She has published several articles on Hittite, Mesopotamian, and Greek epic and poetry and on issues of cross-cultural influence and transmission. A volume she co-edited, *Anatolian Interfaces: Hittites, Greeks and Their Neighbors*, was published in 2008. A book, *From Hittite to Homer: The Anatolian Background of Greek Epic and Prayer*, and a co-edited volume, *The Impenetrability of Desire* (on ancient Greek women's experience and expression of sexual desire), are forthcoming.

Michel-André Bossy has a PhD in Comparative Literature from Yale University and is Professor of Comparative Literature and French Studies at Brown University. He has published *Medieval Debate Poetry: Vernacular Works* (1987), edited two special issues of *Tenso: Bulletin of the Société Guilhem IX*, on Guiraut Riquier, a thirteenth-century troubadour, and co-edited *Lives and Legacies: An Encyclopedia of People Who Changed the World. Artists, Writers, and Musicians* (2001). He is working on a book on Guiraut Riquier and an edition and translation of his complete lyrics and songs. Other current research projects examine the political dimensions of literary art in influential European courts during the thirteenth-century wars between Guelfs and Ghibellines and the Hundred Years War.

Ewen Bowie is an Emeritus Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, where he was E. P. Warren Praelector in Classics from 1965 to 2007, and latterly Professor of Classical Languages and Literature in the University of Oxford. He has published numerous articles and book chapters on archaic Greek poetry, old comedy, Hellenistic poetry, and the literature and *Realien* of the Greek world in the first three centuries CE. Titles relevant for this volume include, for example, "Choral Performances" (2006); "Early Expatriates: Displacement and Exile in Archaic Poetry" (2007), and "Wandering Poets, Archaic Style" (2009).

Albrecht Classen has a PhD in German Studies from the University of Virginia and is University Distinguished Professor of German Studies at the University of Arizona. His recent books include *Despair and Hope: The Search for the Communicative Community in German Medieval Literature* (2002; in German); *The Discourse on Love and Marriage from the High Middle Ages to the Early Seventeenth Century* (2005; in German); *The Medieval Chastity Belt* (2007), and

The Power of a Woman's Voice in Medieval and Early Modern Literature (2007). He has also edited a large number of volumes of scholarly studies, most recently *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Time* (2008).

Olga Merck Davidson received her PhD in Near Eastern Studies from Princeton University. She is currently Visiting Scholar at the Muslim Institute, Boston University. Since 1999, she has served as Chair of the Board of the Ilex Foundation which is dedicated to the promotion of research in Mediterranean and Near Eastern Studies. Her own teaching and research interests center on Persian and Arabic languages and literatures, comparative literature, and women's studies. She has published numerous articles on Iranian epic and poetry (including "Women's Lament as Protest in the Persian Book of Kings" and "The Text of Ferdowsi's *Shahnama* and the Burden of the Past," both 2008) and is author of *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings* (2nd edn. 2006) and *Comparative Literature and Classical Persian Poetry* (2000). Both books have been translated into Persian and published in Iran.

Joseph J. Duggan's PhD is in Romance Languages from Ohio State University. He was the Bernie E. Williams Professor of Comparative Literature until 2003 and serves now as Associate Dean in the Graduate Division of the University of California, Berkeley. His many books include *The "Cantar de mio Cid": Poetic Creation in Its Economic and Social Contexts* (1989); *The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes* (2001), and an edition of *La Chanson de Roland; the Song of Roland: The French Corpus*, 3 vols. (2005).

James L. Fitzgerald has a PhD in Sanskrit and South Asian Civilizations from the University of Chicago. He is the Purandara Das Professor of Sanskrit in the Department of Classics at Brown University. His research and writing center upon the Indian epic *Mahābhārata*. He has published numerous articles and book chapters, is the general editor of the University of Chicago Press's complete translation (in 10 vols.) of the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*, and has himself translated, edited, and annotated Books 11 (vol. 7 [2004], containing "The Book of the Women" and "The Laws for Kings") and 12 (vol. 8 [in progress], containing "The Norms for Gaining Absolute Beatitude").

John Miles Foley received his PhD in English and Comparative Literature from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He is Curators' Professor of Classical Studies and English, and William H. Byler Distinguished Chair in the Humanities at the University of Missouri, Columbia, where he is also Director of the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition and the Center for eResearch. He is editor and founder of the journal *Oral Tradition* (1986–). His many books on oral theory, oral composition, and epic include recently *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (1995); *Homer's Traditional Art* (1999), *How to Read an Oral Poem* (2002), and an edited volume, *A Companion to Ancient Epic* (2005).

Robert D. Fulk's PhD is in English from the University of Iowa. He is Class of 1964 Chancellor's Professor of English at Indiana University in Bloomington. His publications include *A History of Old English Meter* (1992), and a co-authored *History of Old English Literature* (2002), the co-edited *Klaeber's Beowulf and the*

- Fight at Finnsburg* (4th edn. 2008), and the co-authored *Grammar of Old English*, II: *Morphology* (forthcoming 2010). He is co-editor of the journal *Anglo-Saxon* and contributing editor of *Skaldic Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages* (2008).
- Amir Gilan** received his PhD from the University of Leipzig with a dissertation on “Studies in Old Hittite Historiography.” He is currently a research assistant at the University of Mainz. His interests focus on the social, political, and cultural history of second-millennium Anatolia and on Hittite historiography, literature, and religion. He has published several articles on historical narratives, cultic practices, and the construction of identities in Hittite Anatolia (including “Sakrale Ordnung und politische Herrschaft im hethitischen Anatolien” [2004] and “Hittite Ethnicity? – Constructions of Identity in Hittite Literature” [2007]). A book on *Historical Literature from the Old Hittite Kingdom* is in preparation.
- Sander Goldberg** has a PhD from Indiana University and is Professor of Classics at the University of California, Los Angeles. In addition to longstanding interests in drama, epic, and rhetoric, he has increasingly focused on the changing function of literature in Roman society. His main publications include *Understanding Terence* (1986), *Epic in Republican Rome* (1995), and *Constructing Literature in the Roman Republic* (2005).
- Jonas Grethlein** received his PhD in Classics and his “Habilitation” in both Classics and Ancient History from the University of Freiburg im Breisgau. He is Professor of Classics at Heidelberg University. His research interests are in archaic and classical Greek literature, hermeneutical philosophy, and narratology. In 2006 he was the winner of the prestigious Hans-Meier-Leibniz award. His major publications include *Asyl und Athen. Die Konstruktion kollektiver Identität in der griechischen Tragödie* (2003); *Das Geschichtsbild der Ilias. Eine Untersuchung aus phänomenologischer und narratologischer Perspektive* (2006); and *The Past in Fifth-Century Greek Literature* (forthcoming). He is also co-editor of *Narratology and Interpretation: The Content of Narrative Form in Ancient Literature* (2009).
- David Konstan** has a PhD in Greek and Latin from Columbia University. He is the John Rowe Workman Distinguished Professor of Classics and the Humanistic Tradition, and Professor of Comparative Literature at Brown University. His many interests include the cultural history of classical antiquity (emotions, values, ideology) and classical philosophy, especially Aristotle’s ethics and Epicureanism. He has published, among many other books, *Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related Genres* (1994), *Friendship in the Classical World* (1997), *Pity Transformed* (2001), and *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks* (2006; winner of the C. J. Goodwin Award of Merit of the American Philological Association). He is currently working on a book on forgiveness.
- Raymond D. Marks** earned his PhD in Classics at Brown University. He is Associate Professor of Classical Studies at the University of Missouri, Columbia. His primary fields of interest are Roman epic and Latin poetry of the Flavian period. He has published several articles and a book on *Silius Italicus, From Republic to Empire: Scipio Africanus in the Punica of Silius Italicus* (2005). His recent publications include “Getting Ahead: Decapitation as Political Metaphor

in Silius Italicus' *Punica*," and "Augustus and I: Horace and 'Horatian' Identity in *Odes* 3.14" (both 2008). He is currently working on a translation and commentary of the *Res Gestae Saxonicae* of Widukind of Corvey.

Piotr Michalowski has a PhD in Near Eastern Languages and Literatures from Yale University. He is George G. Cameron Professor of Ancient Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Michigan and a member of the American Philosophical Society. He has written widely on many aspects of ancient Mesopotamian cultures, on history, literature, linguistics, and on matters of literacy, historiography, geography, and music, among other topics. Michalowski is the editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*. He has published *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur* (1989) and *Letters from Early Mesopotamia* (1993). Work in progress includes *The Correspondence of the Kings of Ur* and *The Birth of Literature and the Death of Kings*.

Dean Miller received his PhD from Rutgers University and was Professor of History and Religious Studies at the University of Rochester until his retirement in 1993. His main interests have focused on kingship and aristocracy, Byzantine social and political history, and Indo-European studies (with a special concern for the Celtic area). Recent publications include *The Epic Hero* (2000); "Other Kinds of Hero: The Coward Knight and Intelligence Embattled" (2000), and "Emperor and Monk: Byzantine Variations on Direct Contact with the Divine" (2003).

Susan Niditch's PhD is from Harvard University. She is the Samuel Green Professor of Religion at Amherst College where she has taught since 1979. Her research focuses on the cultures of ancient Judaism, and her particular methodological interests include oral literary studies, the body and religion, religious ethics, and gender studies. Recent publications include *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (1996); *Ancient Israelite Religion* (1997); *Judges: A Commentary* (2008), and *My Brother Esau Is a Hairy Man: Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel* (2008).

Kurt A. Raaflaub earned his PhD at the University of Basel. He is David Herlihy University Professor and Professor of Classics and History as well as Director of the Program in Ancient Studies at Brown University. He is corresponding member of the German Archaeological Institute. His interests have focused on the social, political, and intellectual history of archaic and classical Greece and the Roman republic as well as the comparative history of the Ancient World. Recent publications include *The Discovery of Freedom in Ancient Greece* (first English edn. 2004; winner of the American Historical Association's James Henry Breasted Prize), *Origins of Democracy in Ancient Greece* (co-authored, 2007), *War and Peace in the Ancient World* (ed., 2007), and *A Companion to Archaic Greece* (co-edited, 2009).

Dwight F. Reynolds has a PhD in Folklore and Folklife from the University of Pennsylvania. He is Professor of Arabic Language and Literature in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His scholarly interests focus on oral and musical traditions of the Arab Middle East, as well as Arabic literature. Some of his publications are *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes: The*

Ethnography of Performance in an Arabic Oral Epic Tradition (1995), an edited volume on *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* (2001), and *Arab Folklore: A Handbook* (2007). He is section editor of *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: The Postclassical Period* (2006). He is working on a translation of *The Epic of the Bani Hilal* and on a book on the musical and literary history of Arabo-Andalusian music.

Geoffrey Russom's PhD is in English from the State University of New York, Stony Brook. He was Professor of English at Brown University until his retirement in 2009. His scholarly interests have focused on Old English, Middle English, Old Norse, and Old Irish literary cultures, linguistic theory, theory of poetic form, the artistic excellence of preliterate verse traditions and the concept of "barbarian" in imperialist writing. His publications include, apart from numerous articles, *Old English Meter and Linguistic Theory* (1987), and *Beowulf and Old Germanic Metre* (1998). He is working on a book on *English Historical Metrics*.

Dennis Tedlock received his PhD in Anthropology from Tulane University. He is James H. McNulty Professor of English and Research Professor of Anthropology at the State University of New York, Buffalo. He has done field work in Mongolia, Brazil, Guatemala, Mexico, and various places in North America. His recent books include *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life* (rev. edn. 1996), *Breath on the Mirror: Mythic Voices and Visions of the Living Maya* (2nd edn. 1997), *Finding the Center: The Art of the Zuni Storyteller* (2nd edn. 1999), *Rabinal Achi: A Mayan Drama of War and Sacrifice* (2003). *Rabinal Achi: Dialogue, Dance, and History in a Mayan Play* and *The Human Work, The Human Design: 2000 Years of Mayan Literature* are forthcoming.

Susana Torres Prieto earned her PhD ("Doctor Europeus") in Slavic Philology at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid. She is currently a post-doctoral fellow at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris. Her research interests focus on Slavonic epic and manuscript transmission in Slavonic. She has published articles on various aspects of Slavonic epic (regional traditions, translations, Christianization, the Slavonic tradition of the *Alexander Romance*) and is currently working on the propagandistic uses of medieval epic. She has edited *Cantos Epicos Rusos*, a translation with introduction and notes (2003), and co-edited *Medieval Slavonic Studies: New Perspectives for Research* (2009).

Mercedes Vaquero has a PhD from Princeton University and is Professor of Hispanic Studies at Brown University. Her research interests focus on medieval Spanish epic, chronicles, ballads, and oral traditions. Her books include *Tradiciones orales en la historiografía de fines de la Edad Media* (1990); *Cultura nobiliaria y biblioteca de Fernán Pérez de Guzmán* (2003), and *La mujer en la épica castellanoleonesa en su contexto histórico* (2005). A recent book deals with an unknown prosification of an epic: *El "Poema de Fernán González" en un "Memorial de Historias" de fines de la Edad Media* (2008). Currently, she is working on a study and edition of the *Song of the Division of the Kingdoms*.

Joan Goodnick Westenholz received her PhD in Near Eastern Languages and Literatures from the University of Chicago. She is Curator Emerita of the Bible

Lands Museum in Jerusalem and has served several times as Senior Research Associate to the Assyrian Dictionary Project of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago. She has curated thirteen exhibitions, edited recently (among others) *Capital Cities: Urban Planning and Spiritual Dimensions* (1998), *Dragons, Monsters and Fabulous Beasts* (2004), *Three Faces of Monotheism* (2007), and *Sounds of Ancient Music* (2007). In recognition of her work, she was awarded the Israel Prize for Curatorships in 2006. Her books include *Legends of the Kings of Akkade: The Texts* (1997) and several volumes of *Cuneiform Inscriptions in the Collections of the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem*.

Richard Whitaker earned his PhD at the University of St Andrews. He was Professor of Classics at the University of Cape Town until his recent retirement. His research interests include Homeric epic and issues concerned with the translation of Homer into Southern African English (his own translation is now complete); issues in cross-cultural and multicultural translation; comparative study of the oral traditions of Ancient Greece and Southern Africa; comparative study of the influence of Greek and Roman literature on twentieth-century literature in English. Earlier books include *Myth and Personal Experience in Roman Love-Elegy: A Study in Poetic Technique* (1983), an edited volume on *Oral Tradition and Literacy: Changing Visions of the World* (1986), and a collaborative translation from the French of Marcel Jousse's *The Oral Style* (1990). More recently, he has become a successful author of books on life and travel in Southern Africa.

Series Editor's Preface

The Ancient World: Comparative Histories

The application of a comparative approach to the ancient world at large has been rare. This series, of which the current volume is the fourth, intends to fill this gap. It pursues important social, political, religious, economic, and intellectual issues through a wide range of ancient or early societies, occasionally covering an even broader diachronic scope. "Ancient" will here be understood broadly, encompassing not only societies that are "ancient" within the traditional chronological framework of c. 3000 BCE to c. 600 CE in East, South, and West Asia, the Mediterranean, and Europe, but also later ones that are structurally "ancient" or "early," such as those in pre-modern Japan or in Meso- and South America before the Spanish Conquest. By engaging in comparative studies of the ancient world on a truly global scale, this series hopes not only to throw light on common patterns and marked differences but also to illustrate the remarkable variety of responses humankind developed to meet common challenges. Focusing, as it does, on periods that are far removed from our own time and in which modern identities are less immediately engaged, the series contributes to enhancing our understanding and appreciation of differences among cultures of various traditions and backgrounds. Not least, it reveals the continuing relevance of the study of the ancient world in helping us to cope with problems of our own multicultural world.

The current volume, on *Epic and History*, illuminates a topic that is of great interest to many disciplines, offering exceptionally broad coverage not only synchronically across ancient civilizations, but also diachronically, from the third millennium BCE to oral epic traditions that were still alive very recently. This volume also demonstrates exceptionally well the wide range of valuable insights that can be gained through broad but focused and methodologically thorough comparison. In fact, a topic like this can only be dealt with properly and successfully through the collaboration of many specialists in many disciplines: comparative history here is a necessity.

Kurt A. Raaflaub

Introduction

DAVID KONSTAN AND KURT A. RAAFLAUB

This volume presents the results of a collaborative project developed at Brown University under the auspices of the Program in Ancient Studies. The object was to improve our knowledge of one important means by which pre-modern societies commemorated the past and transmitted such memories over time. For this purpose, we invited comparison across a wide variety of different cultures in which traditions of epic – oral or written – existed, or indeed continue to exist. Given, on the one hand, our sparse knowledge of many such traditions and of the circumstances in which they emerged, continued, and were eventually fixed, and, on the other hand, the fact that oral poetry is easily lost to history or altered profoundly in transmission, cross-cultural investigation seemed all the more important – and one of few promising ways to truly enhance our understanding (Raaflaub 2005). We believe that the chapters in this volume confirm this expectation impressively.

Nevertheless, comparisons are invidious in more senses than one. For how is one to be sure that the objects being compared are in fact comparable? The title of a recent book by Marcel Detienne – *Comparing the Incomparable* (2008) – underscores the dilemma. Take the very category of “epic”: is there a single definition that can embrace the varieties of narrative poetry (and prose) produced in the several societies under consideration, from Sumer to South Africa? At least some of the contributors to this volume have raised doubts about the applicability of this term to such diverse materials, as though they formed part of a single worldwide genre.

The notion of “oral” epic is equally problematic. What survives from antiquity is texts, that come to us in written form. To what extent is it safe to infer that these compositions are the culmination of an earlier (or ongoing) oral tradition? Some ancient societies were very bookish, after all, and the profession of scribe was a noble one. Besides, even if one can safely infer that there was an oral phase of transmission, what form did it take? The legacy of Milman Parry’s researches, and those of others

who investigated still living epic recitals or performances in the area of the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere, has generated the concept of oral composition: that is, epic poetry composed in the process of performance (Parry 1971; Lord 1960/2000; Foley, this volume). The poet, on this account, has available a large set of stock themes and stock expressions, most notably the formulae characteristic of Homeric epic, such as “wide-ruling Agamemnon” or “swift-footed Achilles.” Parry argued that these formulae were part of a larger system that emerged over the centuries to facilitate the poet’s task. Thus, major figures in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, like Achilles, Agamemnon, and Odysseus, have a set of formulaic epithets in various metrical shapes – and what is more, only one such epithet for each metrical unit. Thus, the poet, in mid-line, can reach for the formula, or combination of formulae, that will fill out the balance, and saves additional time because he does not have to choose among alternatives. It is like having a whole set of clothes (or set per season) in the closet – shirt, trousers, jacket, etc. – but only one of each: getting dressed is immensely simplified. On this model, it was concluded that oral epic poetry was not normally memorized and reproduced verbatim – the very idea of an exact repetition was often opaque to the poets who were interviewed by Parry – but was always created anew. And yet each version, as we would describe it, created in a specific performance on a specific occasion, was understood to be the poem itself: our notion of a fixed text simply is inapplicable to such a poetic process.

Nevertheless, there are other traditions of oral poetry in which every effort was made to hand down the original with strict fidelity. The religious compositions of India are a case in point, in which huge swaths of verse were memorized exactly, and transmitted faithfully from generation to generation (see Fitzgerald, this volume). There are passages of some length in the Homeric poems as well that are repeated word for word; so it is clear that the Greek bards were capable of reciting from memory – unless we suppose, on no very good grounds, that these passages reflect the introduction of writing and a more precise textual consciousness that accompanied it. Then again, the question of how oral traditions are fixed in writing is itself problematic (see, for example, Grethlein, this volume). Did the poets dictate to scribes trained in stenography? Did they themselves become literate? Was fixation a sudden or a gradual process? Was the process uniform in different parts of the world?

Finally, we come to the question of history. What do we mean by “history” in relation to epic? Several answers suggest themselves. Most basically, epics generally tend to present themselves as narratives of heroic events that occurred some time in the past. It may be a very remote past, preceding the time of composition by centuries, and identified, in some cases, as pertaining to another epoch, in which humans communicated directly with their gods and were much stronger or more just than they are today; or it may be a fairly recent past, as little as a generation prior to the poet’s own time. How faithfully do the poems recall the events they purport to describe, and the world in which they are imagined as occurring?

Some critics have supposed that oral poetry is capable of preserving material from a distant time, whether by the careful training in mnemonic techniques so as to maintain the integrity of the poem, or by virtue of the formulaic technique of oral

composition championed by Parry, in which the very metrical constraints, and the tools developed to meet them, served to fossilize, as it were, certain archaic elements – whether of language or content. An example of the latter is the reference to bronze armor in the Homeric epics: bronze had long been superseded by harder materials, such as iron in swords and other weapons, but the poets preferred to retain, rather than try to update, the handy set of formulae at their disposal, which involved bronze as opposed to the metrically different word for iron. But allowing for such instances, and assuming that the references to bronze were not rather a deliberate archaizing technique on the part of the bards, intended to endow their poems with a patina of antiquity, to what extent can we assume that the specific events recounted, and the social conditions, structures, and relations that form their background, reflect a long past period rather than the contemporary world of the poet? These questions have prompted intense and ongoing debates, for example, concerning the *Iliad*, the Trojan War, and “epic society” (Latacz 2004; Ulf 2003; cf. Grethlein, this volume) or the Vedic Hymns, the *Mahābhārata*, and India’s early history (Fitzgerald, this volume).

This brings us to a second aspect of history in relation to epic: the epics as historical testimony to the time in which they were composed, or were finally set down in the form in which they have reached us. To return to the example of Homer: do the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* reflect the Mycenaean society in which they are ostensibly set, back in the late Bronze Age, when Mycenae was a great capital, or do they rather represent the social world of the late eighth century or even later, when the epics very likely took the form in which we know them today? Arguments have been brought forward, themselves based on comparative research, that historical memory in non-literate societies rarely extends back more than three generations, the time of the grandfathers or at most great-grandfathers; anything beyond that is lost or remembered only in grossly distorted anecdotal form, and the historical time-frame of oral poetry, like any other non-literary medium, is constantly moving, as new social arrangements evolve and the old ones inevitably recede beyond the reach of unaided memory (Vansina 1985). This is a matter of on-going debate, which is reflected in several of the contributions to this volume. If, as is perhaps plausible, we take epic to be constituted from mixed influences, bearing some traces of a faraway past but also mirroring the contemporary world of composition, how might one distinguish between the two, so as to recover evidence for the one or the other? Here again, the comparative approach has much to offer, especially since in many cases, unlike in that of the Homeric epics, we have reliable information about the events ostensibly remembered in the poems and the conditions prevailing at their time, and can judge accurately the extent to which the memory of such events has been distorted. Such distortion affects, of course, only the actual events presumed to have occurred in the historical past, for the epics, precisely to the degree that they are not an exact record of the past, may reveal much about their own time.

There is also a third historical dimension to epic poetry, and that is the record of its subsequent reception – the time since the composition and the period in which it was later read (or sometimes heard) and interpreted. Indeed, in some cases epics are

themselves instances of reception, as they adopt and recast materials from earlier epics, as Virgil, for example, did with Homer (for another example, see Marks, this volume). If the bards were likely to import into their descriptions of a remote past elements, even very basic social features, of their own world, what makes us imagine that we ourselves are immune to similar influences from our own environment? Tracing the record of reception helps alert us to the possibility of such time-bound readings, and hence induces in us a healthy skepticism about our own ostensible objectivity in this regard.

When we were developing our project, we were aware not just of the very great differences in the historical epics we proposed to investigate, but also of the disparities in methodology and approach that characterize the several disciplines devoted to the study of these materials – for here too the issue of our own contemporary history enters into the picture. We sought therefore from the beginning to provide some common focus to our undertaking by setting out a series of questions the contributors were invited to address. Of course, these were meant as guidelines and suggestions, rather than as a rigid format in the nature of a questionnaire. And yet, we believe that this procedure had a positive effect which, we hope, is evident in the coherence of the chapters that follow.

Among other things, we requested that the authors consider to what extent the poetic traditions they were analyzing fit the categories of “oral,” “heroic,” or “epic.” Contributors were asked to discuss to what extent the contents of their epics were bound up with formulaic patterns, whether large or small, and how they imagined the process of fixation in writing that the epics underwent – if indeed they did so at all – and again, how the processes of oral and written transmission related to one another.

A second set of questions looked to determining what we know, or believe we know, about the historical events described in the epics under consideration, independently of the poems themselves. What is more, contributors were asked to reflect on how this knowledge might affect our interpretations of the poems and their relation to history.

Thirdly, the authors were requested to reflect on what we know about the historical circumstances and social conditions in which the extant poems themselves were composed, and to consider whether this has a bearing on the historicity of the epics. Here too, very different results could be expected for many of the traditions under investigation, in many cases influenced by the very shape and assumptions of each person’s own discipline. There was, as expected, a most lively interaction over these matters among contributors, which again is reflected in the chapters of this volume.

A fourth set of problems concerns our knowledge about the patterns and reliability of oral transmission of historical events generally (whether in prose storytelling or in poetry or song). Is epic poetry equally vulnerable to the distortions that students of memory in predominantly oral societies have observed in popular narratives of past events, or does it have some special, perhaps still unrecognized means of preserving historical information? Furthermore, can we point to any differences in the ways that the foregrounded action of the epics – the heroic duels and battles and quarrels and the like – and the social background to these events are transformed over time?

One may doubt that a historical Agamemnon and Achilles really quarreled as they are shown to do in Homer's *Iliad*, but does the social institution of local "kingships," for example, look back to the Mycenaean Age, or does it rather reflect the poet's own world, or one not long past? Related to this question is the problem of the extent to which the narrative patterns characteristic of epic impose constraints on how the past is represented in them. This raises the additional issue of whether such narrative patterns do inform epic poetry generally, or vary from one culture to another, in response, perhaps, to differing ideologies and values.

Fifth, and finally, we asked the contributors to contemplate what the social, political, religious, or ideological function of such poetry might be. Were the epics intended to help stabilize the societies in which they were composed? Or did they represent, perhaps, alternative or partial visions, in the service of parties marginal to or excluded from the dominant social group? Do the epic narratives themselves change as the tradition in which they are embedded is appropriated by different interests within the society, or as one cultural form gives way to another?

The chapters that follow treat epics, or what may, on certain descriptions, be classified as epics, from an exceptionally wide range of cultures, from ancient Sumerian, Hittite, Hebrew, and Indian texts, to the classical epics of Greece and the self-consciously literary imitations of the Roman poets, through the various medieval traditions in western Europe, the Slavic world, and Persia, and on to epics or comparable poetry composed in the former Yugoslavia, South Africa, Egypt, and Central America. There is no need here to provide a summary of the individual chapters, since Dean Miller, the author of a wide-ranging study, *The Epic Hero* (2000), has kindly contributed a final commentary, bringing together the themes that inform the several chapters and offering some provocative final questions and conclusions. Readers will each have questions of their own, as they reflect on the problems of epic and historicity that are addressed here, and some may find cross-cultural patterns that have escaped the editors and the authors themselves. This book, like others in the series of which it is a part, is conceived as a starting point for comparative research, intended to open up new paths for exploration. But the materials that it presents are fascinating in their own right, and we are confident that readers will enjoy this overview of epics round the world, and the picture they provide of the times – whether ancient, contemporary, or indeed our very own – that they represent.

* * *

After initial collaboration between editors and authors, early versions of most of the chapters in this volume were presented and discussed in a workshop at Brown University in early December of 2006. This workshop, under the auspices of the Program in Ancient Studies, had the purpose of enhancing a common focus in all contributions, to foster intense interaction and collaboration among contributors, and to facilitate the creation of a coherent book rather than a volume of collected essays.

For several years a grant from the Kirk Foundation in Florida, offered through the good services of Faith Sandstrom, who received her PhD in Archaeology and Classics at Brown University, and her husband Frederick, one of the foundation's financial

advisors, enabled the Program in Ancient Studies to organize lecture series, conferences, and workshops with stellar international participation. More recently, the Sandstroms decided to offer their own support to our activities. In appreciation of their continuous enthusiastic support, this workshop bore their name: we are truly thankful to them. Thanks were owed to many others as well for their generous contributions: in the first place, to the Program in Ancient Studies, the Department of Egyptology and Ancient Western Asian Studies, the Program in Judaic Studies, the Herbert H. Goldberger Lectureship Fund of Brown University, the Cogut Humanities Center, and the Royce Family Fund for Teaching Excellence, but also to the Program in Medieval Studies, the Classics, English, and History Departments, and the Departments of Comparative Literature, French Studies, German Studies, Hispanic Studies, Italian Studies, and Slavic Languages. The publication of this volume has been facilitated by contributions of the Program in Ancient Studies and the Royce Family Fund for Teaching Excellence.

In addition, we should never forget that it is persons who make things happen. We thank the contributors for their excellent chapters, active participation, and patience; the administrator of the Program in Ancient Studies, Maria Sokolova, for taking care of innumerable administrative details before, during, and after the workshop; Lauren Donovan for preparing the index, and, last but not least, Albert Bertrand, Haze Humbert, Galen Smith, and their collaborators at Wiley-Blackwell for their continuing support of the series and the publication of this volume.

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Maybe Epic: The Origins and Reception of Sumerian Heroic Poetry

PIOTR MICHALOWSKI

The illusions of chronology and evolution require Sumerologists to launch comparative symposia and this often reinforces certain unstated assumptions about primacy, purity, and authority that come with musty old age.¹ The great antiquity of Sumerian writings provides them with a patina of exception: they may be old, but they are not really classical; they are philologically difficult, and therefore exempt from the gaze of modern critical analysis. This puts Sumerologists in a difficult position: we are asked to meditate on epic and history, two Western labels that inhabit very different methodological worlds and that philologists simply take for granted; but the Derridean “madness of genre” (Mullett 1992) haunts all historians and their sources, pressing them with questions concerning matters of composition, reception, and authorial intent that hang over any and all analysis. Since “genre” and “epic” are both Western European concepts, it is often difficult to view other literary traditions without these notions in mind. In confronting the West, cultures with long literary histories but no epics, such as China and Japan, were found wanting (Owen 2007). But although much continues to be written on the topic, some believe that “genre theory has barely moved on in the last thirty or forty years” (Frow 2007: 1629). The same author provides a modern view of the problem, calling genres “performative structures that shape the world in the very process of putting them into speech” (ibid.: 1633). Such a shift from genre as classificatory tool to genre as frame for world-making would seem to provide a better perspective for understanding the matters that are the central subjects of this chapter: Sumerian epic and history.

The classification of certain ancient Mesopotamian texts under the heading of epic is modern, based primarily on loosely perceived family resemblances with poems from other cultures. Thus scholarly intuition has carved out a world of ancient epic and exposed us to the danger of circular reasoning: if composition A is an epic, then analysis will reveal epic qualities that are both local and universal. But the general

Western view of the genre is highly exclusive, and limits itself to selected and intertwined literary histories. A typical expression of a certain comparative literature ethos is the following, taken from an essay on Faust (Bohm 2001: 79):

The arch of European epic rests on Homer as the first and on Milton as the last pillar, encompassing in its sweep major contributors such as Virgil, Dante, Ariosto, Tasso, Chaucer, Spenser and Milton, as well as lesser ones such as Lucan, Statius, Pulci, Boiardo, Vida, Drayton, Cowley, Camões and Klopstock.

Poles will bristle at the slight to Adam Mickiewicz, and others will find their snubs as well. Folklorists have their own catalogs of texts that lie outside of the tradition that was formalized by Alexandrian editors, and of the notions of genre – especially of epic – that were asserted by Aristotle. Although hundreds of years of genre studies have muddled the critical pool, it would seem that many still believe in some form of essentialist, natural notion of genre, in which epic takes a privileged space, so that the distinction between oral and written epic is mediated through the person of Homer. Folk epic, moreover, is distinguished by an accent on performance, a factor that, on some level, at least, negates any difference between improvisation and the delivery of texts that may have been through-composed, to use a musical term, be it orally or in writing.

What we think of as Ancient Mesopotamia spans over six millennia of archaeological time, and more than 3,000 years of literacy. The first writing in Mesopotamia comes from the city of Uruk – a city that will play a central role in our narrative – and can be dated to roughly 3200 BCE. This first preserved Western Asian writing system is essentially a notational device, and is not designed for the precise transcription of speech. By 2600 this inscriptional technology had moved closer to natural language, and was thus capable of carrying more complex messages. Suddenly, during a period that is usually named Early Dynastic, we discover a new world of literature, a virtual explosion of poetic creativity, in the form of large numbers of mythological poems written in the Sumerian language, but also in two or three Semitic tongues (Krebernik 1998: 317–25). We cannot fully translate any of these texts, but we understand enough to perceive the nature of their contents, and to evaluate the sophistication of this literary universe. In socio-political terms these poems were written during a time of independent city-states, but they provide evidence for a common written culture that transcended political fragmentation, and cut through various divisions, including linguistic diversity, to unify scribal intellectual world-views in much of the Near East.

In the twenty-fourth century, a war lord named Sargon (2334–2279) forcibly united the various kingdoms of Sumer and Akkad and profoundly altered the political, economic, and conceptual world of Mesopotamia and surrounding regions. He and his descendants ruled for almost two centuries (c. 2334–2150); part of their legacy was to impose organizational, economic, and social unity upon the land, in an attempt to give political expression to the intellectual harmony of Mesopotamia that until now lay in the realms of religion, myth, and written poetry. The Sargonic

dynasty eventually disintegrated, and after a short return to city-state localism, was replaced by a new centralized state run from the southern city of Ur: we refer to it as the Ur III dynasty (2112–2004). Its short period of glory will be of importance to us here, and I will return to it soon.

Very few literary texts have survived from the time of these two periods of political centralization. Indeed, the vast majority of Sumerian language poems derive from the eighteenth century, although it is obvious that most of them were composed much earlier, primarily in Ur III times. Only a handful of literary texts from Sargonic times have come to light (A. Westenholz 1974–7). There are a small number of Ur III tablets of this type, most of them from one place, the temple of the goddess Inana in the city of Nippur (Rubio forthcoming). This is clearly an imperfect sample of the literary creativity of the time, but it suffices to show that between the twentieth and eighteenth centuries Sumerian literature was subject to a vigorous transformational process, although it is impossible to determine if change was gradual, catastrophic, or a mixture of both. Some texts were discarded, others added, and the ones that were kept were redacted with varying degrees of interference and modernization. Some poems emerged very much the same, while others were considerably altered. All of them, however, were rewritten to conform to a new conceptualization of the Sumerian literary language; this affected every level of language, from phonology to morphology, the lexicon, as well as the repertoire of cuneiform signs, and the way that writing represented the tongue. The newly standardized literary language occupied a privileged, if highly circumscribed register in the socio-linguistic reality of Mesopotamia, as it was no longer spoken anywhere outside of the schools, as far as we know. The general population, including elites, spoke Semitic languages and dialects, primarily Akkadian and Amorite, and these were structurally, genetically, and typologically very different from the old Sumerian tongue, an isolate with no known family members or descendants.

The majority of the thousands of Sumerian literary tablets from the eighteenth century were found in the city of Nippur, in decent-sized houses that were used for schooling of future bureaucrats. Smaller numbers were found in Ur, and even fewer in the cities of Uruk, Sippar, Kish, Isin, Larsa, Susa, Meturan, and elsewhere (Figure 2.1). Almost all early second-millennium literary tablets are the exercises of schoolchildren – with rare exceptions boys – who learned a dead language from adult male teachers, and with it a broad array of literary compositions from ancient times. As far as we can discern, this schooling was a private elite affair and learning was not physically connected with either the palace or with the temple.

The literature of the second millennium existed primarily in the heads of teachers and students; as far as we can determine at present, there were no master copies and no libraries.² The thousands of literary tablets that have been uncovered in cities such as Nippur and Ur are nothing more than the ephemeral exercises of young boys, who learned from written examples as well as from dictation various poems in small sections each day, and were required to write them out from memory, section by section. Once a composition was finished, they were then asked to inscribe it once again, this time in full. Such an encapsulated description overlooks some

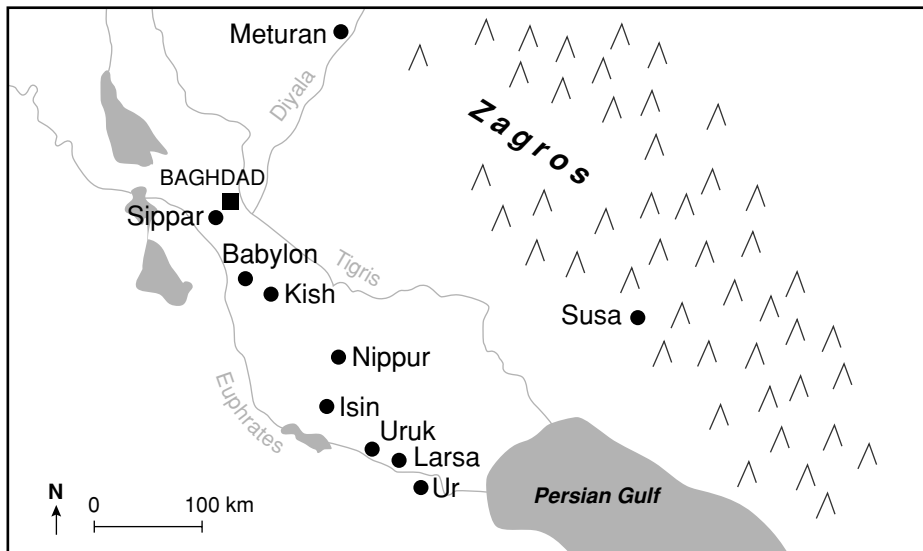


Figure 2.1 Mesopotamia: Major Old Babylonian literary text finds.

details, but it does serve to focus our attention on the complex relationship between written text, memory, and oral transmission, a situation that does not fit many currently accepted cross-cultural typologies of orality and literacy.³

Although the schoolteachers who were the keepers and transmitters of late third- and early second-millennium Sumerian literature maintained the texts in their heads rather than in the form of written tablets, this tradition was never fully oral, as far as we can determine at present. Any analysis of textual discrepancy and manuscript traditions will reveal formalized mistakes and clusters of variants that give evidence for the written origin and transmission of this orally realized school tradition. We can infer that there existed centers of learning where poems were composed, redacted, and adapted for contemporary use, but these were not the schools from which most of our preserved tablets originate. In a sense, a Sumerian literary tablet is the opposite of the modern musical score. In our culture, music is composed and transmitted in writing, but is only realized in performance. In early Mesopotamia literature existed in the heads of people, and was performed in writing, as part of scribal training. The full implications of this situation have not been consistently analyzed, and our modern editions of cuneiform poetry are constructed in a manner that would best fit a fully written manuscript tradition.

It is important to note that absolutely nothing is known about the context in which these poems were composed, about any possible performance environment. We do not have any direct evidence for the motivation or inspiration for such creativity. The scribes who were charged with composing hymns in honor of the Ur III ruler Shulgi credited him with commissioning the praise poems. In one characteristic passage we learn:⁴

My hymns shall be in everyone's mouth
 And my songs shall not leave (their) ears;
 The effectiveness of formal blessings,
 Which (the god) Enki composed for me,
 And which (the goddess) Geshtinana makes even more expansive from her very own
 heart,
 Shall never be forgotten!
 I have had them written down line by line as the greatest examples in the House of
 the Wisdom of Nidaba in sacred heavenly star-writing,
 No one ever shall let them leave their ears,
 (They are) unforgettable; heavenly star-writing cannot be scattered, it lasts forever.
 Scribes shall bring them to musicians, and they shall read them,
 And by the wisdom and intelligence of Nidaba,
 They shall read them aloud to them like from a dark-blue tablet.
 My songs will shine like silver in the mine,
 And be performed in all cult places!
 No one can neglect them in the Shrine of the New Moon,
 In the instrument chambers of (the gods) Enlil and Ninlil,
 During the morning and evening meals of (the god) Nanna,
 The lovely praise of me, Shulgi, shall never cease!

The only clue to performance is perhaps located at the end of the poem about the ancient kings *Enmerkar and Ensuhkeshdana* (lines 274–83):⁵

When Enshuhkeshdana heard this,
 A messenger he sent to Enmerkar (saying):
 “It is you who are the king beloved by Inana, you alone are supreme!
 Inana has faithfully chosen you as her lover, you are her beloved!
 From south to east you are the great king, and I am your servant!
 When you were conceived, I was no match for you; you were already the older brother,
 I cannot (in any way) compare with you, for ever and ever!”
 It was a contest between Enmerkar and Ensuhkeshdana,
 And because Enmerkar overcame Ensuhkeshdana,
 To (the goddess) Nidaba praise!

This kind of ending, which references a contest, is characteristic of a group of Sumerian poems that are debates between elements such as “Cattle and Grain,” “Winter and Summer,” “Hoe and Plough,” “Silver and Copper,” and “Bird and Fish.” Because the last two mention the Ur III kings Ur-Namma and Shulgi, it is possible that these were poems originally composed for court performance, but that is far from certain. All that can be said is that the Ensuhkeshdana tale ends in a manner that links it generically with such texts; the case of the other Enmerkar poem, which will be discussed below, is uncertain, as the final lines are not preserved in any existing manuscript. C. Mittermayer (2007) makes a convincing argument that links *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* (below) with the debate poems, albeit in a highly complex intertextual manner.

With this background in mind, let us turn to the topic at hand. As defined by modern scholarship, the Sumerian epic texts concern three fictional early kings of the city of Uruk, who were named Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, and Gilgamesh. In Mesopotamian tradition they were thought to have lived in very ancient but historical times. Modern scholars who want to believe in their historicity usually place them around 2600, but there is absolutely no reason to think that the “epic” poems, as we have them, in any way describe historical events. Indeed, the claim of historicity of these literary heroes is one of pure belief; like similar quests for King Arthur and other imaginary ancient heroic kings, it is simply a matter of faith and of a willful desire for authenticity and verisimilitude. And as has been the case with Arthur, this quest is both the subject of serious scholarly reasoning and of crackpot assertions. To cite a serious expert, Andrew George, to whom we are all in debt for his masterful edition of the Babylonian Gilgamesh materials (George 2003: 6):

The early rulers of Uruk had a great impact on poets of the third millennium, much as the Trojan war and its aftermath had on Homer. The reigns of Enmerkar, Lugalbanda and Gilgamesh entered legend as the heroic age of early Mesopotamia. One can imagine that court minstrels and storytellers began to compose “lays of ancient Uruk” soon after the lifetime of these heroes. And it would then be no surprise for epic tales of Gilgamesh and his predecessors in due course to appear in writing. At the moment one cannot be sure that this happened in the Early Dynastic period, but it had certainly happened by the end of the millennium.

Such historicism is a matter of personal belief. But even if the issue of whether three kings named Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, and Gilgamesh actually lived at some ancient time in Uruk may be of some historical interest, it has little bearing on the analysis of Sumerian epic, because the *literary figures* of the second millennium tradition were fictitious to the core. In other sources from the imaginary universe of early Mesopotamian history these rulers succeeded each other on the throne of the great southern Mesopotamian city of Uruk, but the first two were unrelated, or so the tradition tells us.⁶ In poetry Lugalbanda is a hero in the retinue of Enmerkar, and then, through a union with the goddess Ninsumuna, sires Gilgamesh, who thus becomes a unique individual, straddling the otherwise unbreachable divide between human and divine. Anticipating Achilles, born of a union between a mortal and a goddess, Gilgamesh is almost, but not quite fully, immortal. Although there is a much earlier excerpt from a poem that describes this romantic encounter, in the later tradition Lugalbanda’s reign as king of Uruk, and his heavenly sexual adventures, take place offstage, and are only alluded to in the Gilgamesh poems.

A unique Lugalbanda text is found among the first large collection of Mesopotamian poetry during the sudden Early Dynastic literary flowering from c. 2600 (Bing 1977; Jacobsen 1989). As far as one can ascertain, almost all these compositions describe the transcendent domain of the gods and goddesses, and are never concerned with humans and their mundane world. This school exercise contains an excerpt of what must have been a longer narrative, and is therefore difficult to

evaluate. Moreover, like other very early Sumerian literary texts, it cannot be fully understood. What can be made out is that Lugalbanda has a liaison with Ninsumuna in the highlands and then comes down into Mesopotamia, most probably into the city of Uruk, and appears before an unnamed king. None of this is repeated in the later tradition.⁷ Gilgamesh does appear as a god in lists of divine beings from the period, but there are no traces of any poems concerning this hero.

The matter is more complicated when we move down to the Ur III period (2100–2000). Although more than 90,000 administrative documents from this time have been published and countless more remain in museums and private collections and in the sands of Iraq, few literary texts of the time have been recovered, most of them from the main temple of the goddess Inana in the city of Nippur (Rubio, forthcoming). There are no early versions of Enmerkar poems, but there are texts that mention both Lugalbanda and Gilgamesh, although little of what we have at present duplicates the compositions that we know from the eighteenth century, and it is quite obvious that the early corpus of such texts was quite different from what we know from later times. A full assessment will have to await Gonzalo Rubio's final publication of the Inana temple materials; here is a short summary of what is known about these texts.

There are four Ur III period pieces that mention Lugalbanda, although only one is substantial enough for analysis; the other three are fragmentary and are not recognizable as belonging to any composition known from later times. The one larger tablet, although incomplete, contains 52 lines of an early version of *Lugalbanda in the Wilderness*.⁸ Although it is clearly part of the same composition, it has 19 lines that have no equivalent in the later redaction, and some of the lines are in different order.

The Uruk heroic poems can be divided into two groups: four centered on the figures of Enmerkar and Lugalbanda, and five Gilgamesh compositions. There are two poems about Enmerkar: *Enmerkar and Ensubkeshdara* (EE, Berlin 1976, Vanstiphout 2003: 23–48) and *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* (ELA, Cohen 1973, Vanstiphout 2003: 49–96, Mittermayer 2007).⁹ The two Lugalbanda tales are really one very long poem that has been divided into two parts for practical pedagogical purposes, and also possibly for symmetry with the Enmerkar material. They are known as *Lugalbanda in the Wilderness* (Vanstiphout 2003: 99–131) and *The Return of Lugalbanda* (Wilcke 1969, Vanstiphout 2003: 132–66). The action of these poems takes place in the east of Mesopotamia, in the liminal border regions and in the far-off mountains of Iran; this is also the setting of one of the most important themes in Mesopotamian “epic” literature, the encounter between Gilgamesh and Huwawa. In early Mesopotamian cosmology, the eastern mountains symbolized a unique nexus of contradictory as well as complementary notions (Michalowski 2009). This was a source of many of the luxury goods that made the good life worthwhile – with the exception of clothing, food, and beer. It was also the home of peoples who continuously threatened to destroy all civilized life in the alluvial plain of what is now Iraq. This is the testing ground in which early Mesopotamian kings demonstrated their martial prowess, where they sought trade and booty, an area

that also tested their diplomatic skills. The inhabitants of what we call Iran had very different habits, were often hostile, and spoke in various non-Mesopotamian tongues, but they were also kin, whose sons often married princesses of the ruling houses of Mesopotamia. On the mythological plane, this was where the sun rose, coming out of its nocturnal journey through the netherworld; facing east one welcomed the new day, but also the prospect of death, since the entrance to the netherworld was located in the place of sunrise, and the word for mountain in Sumerian was also one of the names of the underworld (Katz 2003).

Upon this symbolic canvas, the author of the Enmerkar and Lugalbanda tales imposed a singular narrative invention: a city named Aratta. I say invention, as I am convinced that the place is pure fiction, created for imaginative reasons (Michalowski 1986, Potts 2004), although fairness forces me to admit that others disagree and continually seek to identify every new discovery of an early large city or cultural complex with Aratta. The emblematic description of Aratta and of the dialectical symbolic tensions between Mesopotamia and the highlands is inscribed in *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*. This Aratta lies beyond seven mountain ranges – long ago and far away – but it is, to some degree, a mirror image of Uruk. Both of these cities are sacred to the goddess Inana, both have temples named in Sumerian, and it would seem that both spoke the same language. The difference lies in the content of their riches – Uruk has grain, while Aratta has precious stones and metals, the typical products of the highlands – and the favor bestowed upon Uruk by the goddess Inana, who, while worshipped in both places, prefers the Sumerian city over its Iranian counterpart.¹⁰ In the contest between the two it is not force of arms but cultural superiority that wins the day, as has often been observed. Uruk wins because the kings, heroes, and the very nature of Mesopotamian civilization are demonstrably superior. The plots of both *EE* and *ELA* are focused on solving military and economic tensions by means of competitions. In the first poem it is Ensuhkeshdana, king of Aratta, who issues the challenge and demands the surrender of Uruk; in the second one it is Enmerkar, ruler of Uruk, who insists on the submission of the Iranian city, but the nature of the contest is determined by the ruler of Aratta. In *EE* the conflict is resolved by means of a contest between two sorcerers; the one from Mesopotamia is, of course, victorious. A sorcerer, from Hamazi, a place somewhere between the two cities, and therefore liminal even within the imaginary geography of the text, wreaks havoc on the flocks of the city of Eresh, thus far unlocalized, but undoubtedly in Mesopotamia. A wise old woman, who also knows witchcraft, challenges the intruder, and bests him in six contests. The sorcerer from Hamazi admits defeat and pleads for his life, but without success, and is executed by the woman from Eresh, thus ending Aratta's challenge. In *ELA*, it is the very kings of Uruk and Aratta who compete, and they do so by means of riddles. Central to the whole cycle is the motif or structural element of the three challenges; the king of Aratta offers three riddles for his Uruk counterpart to solve, involving the symbolic elements of grain, scepter, and a champion (Vanstiphout 1995). But the riddles are only a narrative ploy that prepares the ground for the final breakthrough in the plot: the messenger who carries the royal riddles across the mountains becomes tired of it all and he cannot

remember the words that he is to relate, so, on the spot, Enmerkar invents writing to assist him with his task (Komoróczy 1975, Vanstiphout 1989). In *ELA* it is the cuneiform writing system that is critical in bringing about Aratta's defeat, as its king cannot read an inscribed tablet; the narrator thus focuses on the cultural advantage of the literate Mesopotamians. Divine intervention then ends the riddle-filled dispute: the storm god sends down a drought-ending rainstorm, Inana recognizes Enmerkar as her champion, perhaps even as an incarnation of her lover Dumuzi, the Mesopotamians are victorious, and the highlands must succumb.

The Lugalbanda compositions are in a sense transitory between the Enmerkar material and the more elaborated Gilgamesh poems, in terms of dynastic continuity as well as thematic development. The early Mesopotamian historiographic tradition preserves the notion that Lugalbanda succeeded Enmerkar on the throne, but the epic poems describe events that took place when the latter was still king and Lugalbanda was a young warrior faithfully and enthusiastically serving his master at the time of an expedition against Aratta. They describe the cunning and the acquired supernatural abilities of the hero, who single-handedly assures Uruk's victory over the Iranian city, and once again poetry asserts Mesopotamia's essential superiority (Vanstiphout 2002).

Of all the narratives under consideration here, the Lugalbanda poems are by far the most elaborated and complex. The two parts together cover over 1,000 lines, which ranks among the longer Sumerian compositions from the period. While they share much, if not all of the underlying structure of the Enmerkar poems, the intricate, unpredictable plot line, difficult symbolic elements, and the movements back and forth between mundane and transcendent orders are unique. The narrative is often difficult to follow as there is no edition of the first part of the story, and lacunae, as well as passages that have conflicting interpretations in both parts, still remain. After an introduction that locates the action in the remote past, the story begins as Enmerkar calls up troops for a campaign against Aratta. The army is led by seven supernatural warriors, as well as by Lugalbanda, who is described simply as the "eighth of them." Halfway to their goal, in the midst of the eastern mountains, the young hero falls grievously ill, and so his companions, who cannot send him back in the state he is in, find a warm place, and leave him there with copious provisions. He is in the mountains, and therefore in a place that has symbolic associations with death; there is a double symbolism to the dwelling that they prepare for him and the goods they leave behind, as it is both a comforting abode and a possible tomb. But Lugalbanda recovers, with the help of celestial deities, comes out of his cave, and learns to live in the wild, mastering the art of cooking, which was something he never had to do for himself before. He makes offerings to the gods, and this is followed by what seems to be a cosmic battle, but the first half of the text is not fully preserved, and the end is unknown at present.

When the story picks up in *The Return of Lugalbanda* (RL), the hero is all alone in the remote mountains, and he decides to find a way out by appeasing the enormous, magnificent creature named Anzu, with the body of an eagle, shark's teeth, and the head of a lion. The mythic genre-bending character of this being

reflects the liminal state that Lugalbanda has found himself in, stuck in the midst of faraway mountains, halfway between life and death, and between the dual civilizations of Uruk and Aratta. He gains the bird's confidence by feeding and adorning its young – utilizing his new learned cooking skills – and when Anzu is forced, quite ironically one may add, by rules of hospitality to reciprocate, Lugalbanda rejects all presents and asks for magical speed. The bird grants him the power, but demands that he must keep it all a secret. The young warrior then bounds by leagues across the mountains and joins his comrades on the road to Aratta, who are amazed by his presence. But the road to the enemy city is dangerous: they are harassed by snipers with slingshots and attacked by lions. King Enmerkar, in despair, asks for a volunteer to travel back to Uruk and appeal for help to the goddess Inana. Lugalbanda takes up the task and, all alone and without provisions accepts the challenge and, that very same day, having sped across seven mountain ranges, repeats his master's plea to the goddess, and in reply receives instruction on how to conquer Aratta by magical means. The text ends abruptly with the following lines that celebrate the natural resources of the conquered city that were the object of the Urukean campaign (*RL* lines 413–17; Wilcke 1969: 128–9; Vanstiphout 2003: 158–9):

Aratta's battlements are lapis-lazuli,
 Its rising city-wall brickwork is reddish (in color),
 Its clay is tin-bearing clay,
 Taken out of the Cypress Mountains!
 Holy Lugalbanda be praise!

After such a long buildup, the anticlimactic, brief resolution may seem surprising and unfulfilling to the modern reader. And this is but one indication of how difficult it is to grasp the interpretive conventions of this ancient literature and to appreciate its aesthetics without the filter of our own expectations.

Is there any relationship between history and the poems that comprise the “Matter of Aratta”? Earlier generations of scholars certainly thought so, most prominently the great pioneer of the modern study of Sumerian literature, Samuel Noah Kramer, who considered these compositions as evidence for Early Dynastic history of southern Mesopotamia, followed by many philologists, but also by archaeologists and historians who attempted to mine these epics for information on matters such as early trade in precious metals and stones, gift exchange, geography, and warfare.¹¹ But even if one were to accept the notion that the fabric of these texts involves elements that hearken back to oral folklore (Vanstiphout 1995), the texts that have come down to us are highly stylized and literary, and cannot be older than the Ur III period, although processed and redacted over a period of two centuries. For the ancient authors, teachers, and students these texts were about the present, albeit projected into the past; indeed it is this very act of projection that marks them as fiction, not as ethnography or history. In that sense this compares with later developments far to the west; to quote Gregory Nagy (1990): “the preoccupation of Greek poetry with the application of the past to the here and now is in itself an exercise of political power.”

It may be history, in addition to an exercise of power, but only in a specific sense, to cite still another author, David Quint (1989: 9), writing on “Epic and Empire”:

Epic takes particularly literally the axiom that history belongs to the winners. Imperial conquest of geopolitical space – the imposition of a single, identical order upon different regions and peoples – becomes a process of history-making.

Of all the texts under discussion here, the two Enmerkar poems best conform to this axiom *avant la lettre*, as they explicitly pronounce the superiority of one cultural and political order, and labor to explain Mesopotamian cultural supremacy over the East. On the narrative level they share a general, overarching structural outline, and although the plot lines certainly differ, the structural pattern of the stories is the same, and there is reason to think that they are but realizations of one abstract underlying story. That may be true to a point, but, as Mittermayer (2007) notes, the actual story line of the Lugalbanda narrative, with its strong mythological elements, is quite different from the ruler-centered narrative of *ELA*.

Story-making brings us to the Gilgamesh poems. While they are mostly attested in eighteenth-century garb, we have enough earlier fragments to securely locate their date of composition to the time of the Third Dynasty of Ur, which ruled Sumer and Babylonia for one century, 200 years earlier.¹² There are six Gilgamesh tales that we know were used in the Old Babylonian schools:¹³

- 1 *Gilgamesh and Huwawa A* (GHA; Edzard 1990, 1991; Civil 2003)
- 2 *Gilgamesh and Huwawa B* (GHB; Edzard 1993)
- 3 *Gilgamesh and Akka* (GA; Römer 1980; Katz 1993)
- 4 *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven* (GBH; Cavigneaux and al Rawi 1993)
- 5 *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* (GEN; Gadotti 2005)
- 6 *The Death of Gilgamesh* (DG; Cavigneaux and al Rawi 2000; Veldhuis 2001)

The Gilgamesh material is not homogeneous, neither in its history, in its distribution, nor in its content and style. Decontextualized and set out sequentially on consecutive pages in a modern book they appear as a synchronic cycle, but the evidence from antiquity undermines this picture. In order to avoid an overly specialized discussion, I concentrate here on two lines of evidence: ancient literary catalogs that are thought to contain listings of texts used at a certain level of school instruction, and the matter of manuscript distribution in various cities.¹⁴

- 1 GHA. This text is known from tablets from Nippur, Kish, Sippar, Susa, Uruk, and Isin. It is listed in literary catalogs from Nippur and Ur.
- 2 GHB is listed in literary catalogs from Nippur and Ur, but is documented by the lowest number of manuscripts. There are only four sources, one from Uruk, two from Nippur and one from an unknown site.
- 3 GA appears in catalogs from Nippur and Ur. With one exception, which is unprovenanced, all sources are from Nippur.

- 4 *GBH* is listed in literary catalogs from Nippur and Ur. It is currently documented only on tablets from Nippur and Meturan, and one from an unknown site.
- 5 *GEN* is listed in literary catalogs from Nippur and Ur. There are numerous Nippur and Ur tablets with this poem, and only one unprovenanced piece.
- 6 *DG*. This composition is not known from any catalogue and is attested only in six Nippur sources and eleven from Meturan.

The literary catalogs provide additional clues. They always list the “Aratta” poems separately from the Gilgamesh tales. It is also instructive that although only two of these compositions are actually attested at Ur (*GHA* and *GEN*), all the others, with the exception of the *Death of Gilgamesh*, are listed in catalogs from this city.

The distribution of the texts clearly shows that in the eighteenth-century schools the best known Gilgamesh tale was *GHA*, that is the story of the expedition against Huwawa and the Cedar Forest. When, outside of Nippur, in some unknown parts of Babylonia, poets began to write about the great hero in the Akkadian language, it was precisely this episode that was related time and again. Similarly, *GEN* was frequently studied in Old Babylonian schools in Nippur and Ur, and the second half of the tale was incorporated almost verbatim, in a literal Akkadian translation, as the final chapter of the first millennium *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

On the other hand, the story about the death of Gilgamesh is poorly attested, and is the only one not listed in the catalogs. It seems to have been marginal, and narrates one of the episodes that was not utilized when the integrated Akkadian epic was created. The same is true of *GHB*, the shorter version of the Cedar Forest episode. It is difficult to know what to make of *GBH* and *GA*; both are mainly known from Nippur, although the former is also attested in the peripheral collection from Meturan (Cavigneaux 1999), which seems to preserve a somewhat different literary tradition. The Akka story, like the unique tale of the death of the hero, was also not incorporated into the late grand epic.¹⁵

The history of the Gilgamesh poems is different from any other collection of Sumerian poetry. The vast majority of the over 300 literary compositions used in Old Babylonian education are otherwise unknown: of the major texts, only five are attested in earlier versions, and few of them survived into the first millennium.¹⁶ We

Table 2.1 Six *Gilgamesh* tales used in the Old Babylonian schools

	<i>Ni lc</i>	<i>Ur lc</i>	<i>Ni</i>	<i>Ur</i>	<i>Kish</i>	<i>Susa</i>	<i>Uruk</i>	<i>Isin</i>	<i>Sippar</i>	<i>Meturan</i>	<i>Unknown</i>
<i>GHA</i>	x	x	72	7	2	1	1	1			7
<i>GHB</i>	x	x	2				1				1
<i>GA</i>	x	x	15								1
<i>GBH</i>	x	x	16							3	1
<i>GEN</i>	x	x	48	13			1	1	1	2	1
<i>DG</i>			6							11	

have already seen that, although the roots of the Lugalbanda tradition seem to go back to the Early Dynastic period, the figure of the hero does not appear outside of literature before the Ur III period, when he was venerated as a god. Gilgamesh, on the other hand, is already listed in Early Dynastic lists of divinities, but there are no traces of any poetry about him before Ur III times.

At the time of this writing most of the earliest Gilgamesh material remains unpublished, and so I will only summarize it briefly, although it will be available by the time this chapter appears (Rubio, forthcoming). There are five Ur III tablets that contain fragments of Gilgamesh poems. Three are fragmentary and do not seem to belong to any known tale about the Uruk king.¹⁷ The only sizable manuscript describes a sexual escapade involving the hero, and while this is hardly uncharacteristic of him, it is also unique and represents a story that was discarded from the literary corpus at some moment before the eighteenth century. The only early piece that is connected with a known Gilgamesh poem is a practice tablet that contains an excerpt that one can easily recognize as part of the later *GBH*.¹⁸ The orthography is different, and some words have been replaced by others, but it is certainly closer to its later counterpart than was the Ur III version of Lugalbanda.

The earlier history of the other Gilgamesh stories cannot be reconstructed at the present time, and any opinion as to the time of their composition, and about the subsequent redactional process must remain hypothetical. But one of them, *Gilgamesh and Akka* (*GA*), is perhaps the most contested of the lot. At 114 lines, it is by far the shortest of all the stories in the Uruk cycle, and its plot appears at first glance to be simplified to the point of incomprehensibility, a fact that has been recently been explained as a folklore element (Civil 1999–2000). I find this difficult to believe, as I am not at all certain that there was any folklore tradition concerning Gilgamesh and other ancient kings, and if there were, I would expect it to surface in the Akkadian language stories, and not in the dead, scribally preserved Sumerian tongue.

Much has been written about the historicity of the events narrated in *GA*, as various scholars have attempted to locate its composition or remolding at different times in the Mesopotamian past (Katz 1993). Perhaps nothing has attracted more attention in all the early Gilgamesh materials than the “councils” of elders and young men in *GA*, a literary fiction that has led to decades of arguments over Early Dynastic political structure (Yoffee 2005: 110–11). Recently, Claus Wilcke (1998) has suggested, based on an analysis of grammar and writing conventions, that is an Old Babylonian composition that had no earlier version. I believe that he is right in his conclusions, although not in his argumentation, because almost all Sumerian texts were subject to a redactional process that brought them into conformity with a standard literary form of the language that was created in Old Babylonian times, as noted above, so even if it had been older to begin with, it would have been altered to fit the new norm. Nevertheless, one can suggest on other grounds that the short poem about Gilgamesh and Akka was an Old Babylonian parody of the tradition of divine kingship, a tradition that no longer had any meaning to the students and teachers who had to live with the narrative (Michalowski 2008).

The heterogeneous nature of Sumerian Gilgamesh tales forces interpretive caution. Nevertheless, it is possible to suggest a broad ideological context for the world-creating mechanisms of these texts. As already noted, most contemporary scholars think that the Uruk poems, and the Gilgamesh stories in particular, were first composed during the time of the Ur III dynasty. There are good reasons to think this: the founder Ur-Namma chose Ur as the capital for his new patrimonial state, but his family roots lay in the city of Uruk. In his royal hymns, as well as in those of his son Shulgi, the new king represented himself as the brother of Gilgamesh, and therefore also as the son of Lugalbanda. But behind these narrative themes there lurks a more complex and profound aspect of Ur III royal self-representation, one that can be linked to specific historical circumstances that forced the second ruler of the state to manipulate and alter the Uruk foundation myth of the dynasty.

Ur-Namma reigned only 18 years, although his short reign was rich in accomplishments, as he successfully coerced the city-states of Mesopotamia to accede to centralized control and evicted Iranian occupations from both the south and north of the land.¹⁹ His end was dramatic and unexpected, unannounced by any ominous messages from the gods. Later tradition associated the end of his son's reign, as well as the very end of the whole dynasty, with oracular lunar eclipses (Gasche et al. 1998: 74), but the divine world apparently sent no warning to Ur-Namma, who died prematurely on the field of battle. Nevertheless, by the dictates of the Mesopotamian worldview, such a death could only happen as the result of the withdrawal of divine favor, and this must have undermined to the core the web of elite allegiances of the young kingdom, threatening its continuing existence. The new king, Shulgi, spent the first half of his reign repairing this damage and managed to hold the state together. Among the ideological elements that he introduced as part of his damage control were two that, one may suggest, must be linked together. He proclaimed himself to be a god, resurrecting a short-lived tradition that had first been introduced by Naram-Sin of the Akkad Dynasty. He also wiped clean the literary slate of the land, replacing the old Early Dynastic mythological literature with a whole new corpus, much of which was focused on the person of the country's ruler, that is on himself. The new texts included stories about the semi-divine Gilgamesh of Uruk, who was his brother, and therefore Shulgi also became the son of King Lugalbanda and the goddess Ninsumuna; thus the world of Uruk lore and epic provided the foundation myth for the new conceptualization of divine kingship in Ur.

This, in a nutshell, is the hypothesis that explains the fundamental world-creating aspects of the new epic literature. But as seductive as this may seem, it is impossible to work out the ideological details because, as elaborated earlier in this chapter, the Old Babylonian corpus of these texts is not representative of what was there in Ur III times, that is, at the moment when divine kingship presumably motivated the composition of the poems. Nevertheless, it is possible to ascertain that the issue of eternal glory as a metaphor for immortality, and the concomitant problem of the mortality of immortal kings is central to the Ur III epic project. But the truly serious notion of divine kingship died with the end of that dynasty; by Old Babylonian times these issues were no longer of much interest. Some Ur III compositions, such

as the royal hymns, were used in the schools, but were discarded by the middle of the second millennium, when Mesopotamian literature was once again transformed, as were the stories about Aratta.²⁰ Designed to overcome death, they survived long after the family of Ur-Namma lost control over kingship.

It is fascinating to observe that in the end Ur was overrun by forces from the East, the very area that formed the canvas for much heroic epic action, the imaginative frontier that was so important to kings, soldiers, adventurers, as well as to poets. But these events did not diminish the importance of the Gilgamesh tradition. Long after divine kingship had lost its appeal, it was reconstructed to bring to the fore more universal themes, was reconfigured in a new literary language – Babylonian – and survived, in successive versions for more than a millennium and a half, longer than any other composition from the ancient Near Eastern world. The protagonists remained the same, and some of the narrative themes were repeated, albeit with very different subtexts and semantic reference, but the poem was deracinated and instilled with new meaning. Most telling of all, the East was no longer a psycho-ideological issue, so that while the story of the expedition to the Cedar Forest was retained, the place itself was transformed, as it was now to be found in the mountains of the Lebanon.

In closing, I would like to address the issue of epic and history directly. One way of looking at these Sumerian language poems is to confront their multiple alterity. Originally conceived as mythological sanction of the present, projected geographically and temporally to a liminal area and an invented remote heroic past, they were successively remodeled, until they were stripped of most of the trappings of historical reference. The Matter of Aratta was discarded, and only Gilgamesh remained – an ancient warrior king who struggled with destiny and the significance of historical memory. Originally designed as historical reinvention, the epic texts, now reduced to the figure of Gilgamesh, became the central medium of meditation about history itself, albeit without any light from Troy.

Notes

- 1 All dates in this chapter are BCE. The translations from Sumerian texts are my own and sometimes differ from published renditions that are found in the sources referenced after each translation. I would like to thank Ahlena Gadotti for providing me with a copy of her unpublished doctoral dissertation (Gadotti 2005), to Cathrine Mittermayer for her unpublished thesis (Mittermayer 2007) as well as helpful comments, and to Claus Wilcke, who kindly sent me his private edition of *Lugalbanda in the Wilderness*. I am also grateful to Elisabeth Paymal for creating the map included here.
- 2 This is a complex matter that cannot be discussed here. While it is generally assumed that during this period most texts were taught from memory by dictation, there are also some indications that copying from exemplars written by others may also have been used, as was the norm in later times.
- 3 In Michalowski 1992 I argued against utilizing models of “oral tradition” in the study of early Mesopotamian literature, and, with some modifications, I continue to hold these

- views to this day. Others disagree; see, for example Alster 1992 and J. Westenholz, this volume.
- 4 *Shulgi Hymn E* 240–57, translated from an unpublished text reconstruction by Jacob Klein. This is an extremely difficult passage and the translation is provisional. The references to stars as writing and the dark-blue (or lapis-lazuli) tablet allude to a tradition whereby Nidaba, the goddess of writing, holds a lapis tablet on her lap with twinkling stars, that is the heavens are a writing space, and the stars cuneiform signs.
 - 5 Berlin 1976: 58–9; Vanstiphout 2003: 44–5. There is some disagreement about the reading of the name; some prefer Ensuhgiran(n)a; most recently, Mittermayer (2007: 20) argues that the name of the king of Uruk should be read as Enmerkara, rather than as Enmerkar.
 - 6 The main source of information on the earliest rulers of Mesopotamia is the text known today as the *Sumerian King List* (Jacobsen 1939). Over the years scholars have debated the time and purpose of its composition. The publication of an Ur III manuscript (Steinkeller 2003) has obviated many earlier studies; it was either composed during the time of the Akkad kings, or, more probably, in Ur III times, more precisely during the reign of Shulgi.
 - 7 Alster (1993: 33–4) has suggested that there were other Lugalbanda tales in Early Dynastic times, but this remains a hypothesis only.
 - 8 This tablet, 6N-T638 will be fully edited by Rubio. Most of its content has been known for years, as it was briefly dealt with in Cohen 1973: 10–14.
 - 9 The names are modern; the ancients referred to them by their first line. For convenience, I have adopted the names used by Vanstiphout 2003. The Lugalbanda poems are often called by other names, *Lugalbanda A* and *B*, or *Lugalbanda and the Mountain Cave* and *Lugalbanda and Anzu*. The term “lord” is an old rendition of the Sumerian word *en*, which was the local term for “king” at Uruk, and should be translated accordingly.
 - 10 Inana’s favoring of Uruk over Aratta is evident from Mittermayer’s (2007) new interpretation of the text. From this new rendition of the text we learn that Inana’s lover Dumuzi had founded the city in mythological antiquity, but by the time of the narrative the goddess no longer gave any preference to the Iranian city.
 - 11 See, most prominently, Kramer 1963. For a synopsis of some of the different points of view on the issue, see Raflaub 2005: 57.
 - 12 Wilcke 1969: 1; Michalowski 2008.
 - 13 All are translated in George 1999; new English translations will appear in my forthcoming anthology of Sumerian literature.
 - 14 On the literary catalogs (lc), see the convenient summary of Krecher (1980). I have established the table of manuscripts on the basis of the published and unpublished editions of the texts, and from Miguel Civil’s unpublished catalog of Sumerian literary texts.
 - 15 *DG* has strong intertextual relationships with a Sumerian poem about the death of Ur-Namma, the founder of the Ur III dynasty; it is possible that once this relationship was no longer of interest, *DG* was discarded from the canon, although there are elements that suggest its influence in the later epic in the episode of Enkidu’s death.
 - 16 Aside from the Lugalbanda tale discussed above, these are: *The Instructions of Shuruppak* and the *Kesh Temple Hymn*, known in Early Dynastic versions, as well as *The Curse of Agade*, *The Sumerian King List*, and *The Sumerian Temple Hymns*, which are already attested in Ur III manuscripts.

- 17 One, which does not include the name of Gilgamesh, does mention Huwawa, but cannot be identified with either *GHA* or *GHB*; Alster 1993: 3–4.
- 18 Ni 13230 (Çiğ and Kızılyay 1969: 149; Cavigneaux and al Rawi 1993: 101–3). Alster (2004: 33–4) suggests that this motif was already known earlier and identifies Early Dynastic texts that may belong to this tradition, although the name of Gilgamesh is not present in any of them.
- 19 This section summarizes an argument I have made in more detail in a separate discussion of divine kingship in early Mesopotamia (Michalowski 2008).
- 20 A version of *RL* was preserved in a Sumerian-Akkadian bilingual version in the seventh-century libraries of Assurbanipal of Assyria, and Enmerkar is occasionally mentioned in later literature, notably in a fragmentary Akkadian language poem that does not seem to have any connection with the Sumerian Uruk cycle (Picchioni 1981: 102–9).

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Historical Events and the Process of Their Transformation in Akkadian Heroic Traditions

JOAN GOODNICK WESTENHOLZ

The first historical kings to endure abidingly in the literary tales of their people were the Sargonic kings of the Dynasty of Akkad (2334–2154 BCE).¹ The compositions based on the extraordinary deeds of these ancient rulers are exceptional in the depth of their diachronic span and synchronic spread. Oral traditions and written texts existed side by side during the two and a half millennia of Akkadian literary history; the transmission, reception, and repetition of literary works were both oral and written.

Widespread and popular legends of these early kings were told and retold throughout the generations and were magnified and embellished with each retelling. Their deeds stirred the imagination of all the surrounding cultures, inspiring legends that were handed down not only in Akkadian but also in Sumerian and Hittite. This saga and its heroes soon became the subject of a tradition of folklore, then of literature, then of history, beginning directly after the events themselves. Folktale motifs such as that of the exposed child were added, and at the same time, the stories underwent a process of transformation, through elaboration, distortion, and reinterpretation.

Despite their renown, the narrative compositions that have survived the millennia are fragmentary, short, and quite often unique, hardly of the length and quality of other epic texts.² Present evidence indicates that the longest narrative would have comprised only 600 lines (if we had the complete composition). It would seem useful to give here a brief synopsis of the roles of the Akkadian kings and the literary compositions containing the traditional tales told of them.

The Texts

*Res Gestae Sargonis*³

Sargon appears as *primus inter pares*, a military commander seeking the advice and assistance of his subordinates before he hazards them and himself upon unknown paths of glory. In our oldest texts they encourage Sargon to undertake his military campaigns but in the later compositions they try to discourage him. Nevertheless, Sargon is a hero without flaws. He is the epitome of a pious and successful ruler. His exploits surpass all others in courage and audacity, and set a standard that was never to be equaled. The literary compositions conclude with a challenge to posterity: “Lo, the king who wants to equal me, let him go where I have gone.” The motif of exploration into the unknown, to the farthest ends of the world, was an important part of the Sargon cycle of stories. The tales that have survived in writing are woven around his birth, his rise to power, and particularly his military expeditions to the vast territories of the Akkadian Empire and beyond. The following is a complete list of written compositions, with their approximate date, language, and a short synopsis:⁴

The Sargon “Autobiographies”

- 1 “I, Sargon.” One manuscript. Old Babylonian, 1800–1700. Akkadian. First nine lines of a first person narrative preserved. Mention is made of the love of the goddess Ishtar for Sargon and Sargon’s journeying to the corners of the world.
- 2 “The Wisdom of Sargon”: The “Birth Legend of Sargon.” Four manuscripts. Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian, 704–539. Akkadian. In the narrative shape of the present composition, the *Sargon Birth Legend*, the tale of the hero exposed at birth, forms a frame story for a wisdom text, which expresses the futility of all endeavor.

Sargon’s Rise to Power

- 3 “The Sumerian Sargon Legend.” Two different manuscripts, Old Babylonian, 1800–1700. Sumerian. Story of his youth as cupbearer in the court of Ur-Zababa, king of Kish, the dream given by Inanna, his dispatch to Lugalzagesi in Uruk, the invention of the envelope to hold the message of death.
- 4 Excerpt. Old Babylonian/Middle Babylonian, 1650–1450. Bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian. Sargon in the palace of Ur-Zababa, king of Kish.

Res Gestae Sargonis

- 5 Old Assyrian Sargon Legend. One manuscript. Old Assyrian, c. 1850. Akkadian. Four *topoi*: (a) the swiftness of Sargon, (b) the King’s Table, (c) the passage through darkness, and (d) the catalogue of conquered peoples.
- 6 “Sargon, the Conquering Hero.” One manuscript. Old Babylonian, 1800–1700. Akkadian. Three segments: (a) talk of battle, (b) narrative concerning an expedition to the faraway land of Uta-rapaštim, solar eclipse, and victory over Simurru, and (c) the catalogue of conquered cities and closing oration.

- 7 “Sargon in Foreign Lands.” One manuscript. Old Babylonian, 1800–1700. Akkadian. Segments: (a) narrative relating Ishtar’s help, Sargon’s triumphs, his pious thanksgiving, (b) dialogues between Sargon and his “heroes,” (c) victory over Simurru, and (d) passage through the forest in darkness.
- 8 “Sargon, the Lion.” Two manuscripts. Old Babylonian/Middle Babylonian, 1650–1450. Akkadian. Events involve battle in the environs of Elam, and the Cedar Forest in the east.
- 9 “Sargon, King of Battle.” The compositions concerning Sargon’s campaign to Purušhanda at the request of the merchants.
 - 9A Six manuscripts. Empire period, 1300–1200. Late Hittite.
 - 9B–C Two manuscripts. Middle Babylonian, c. 1350. Peripheral Akkadian.
 - 9D–E Two manuscripts. Neo-Assyrian, 850–600. Akkadian.

The Sargon Letters

- 10 Nippur letter. One manuscript. Old Babylonian, 1800–1700. Akkadian. School text preserves beginning of letter.
- 11 Ur letter. One manuscript. Old Babylonian, 1800–1700. Akkadian. Letter with list of officials.

Narām-Sîn

In comparison with Sargon, Narām-Sîn is more of an epic hero, burdened with the tragic flaw of hubris, the flaunting of the authority of the gods. He is a self-willed individual; Narām-Sîn stands alone against his opponents. It is true that he has an army but there is no aide-de-camp. Unlike Sargon, he does not seek the advice and assistance of his subordinates before he hazards them and himself in battle. He is placed above them, on the level of the divine; he is *il mātīm*, “god of the land.” The gods accompany him on campaign, and bestow their weapons and blessings on him. He appears as a man of action as well as introspection. Having suffered reversals in battle, he takes stock of his abilities as king and shepherd of his people. Through these experiences, he becomes a peace-minded and mature leader. The following is a complete list of written compositions, with their approximate date, language, and a short synopsis:⁵

- 12 “Narām-Sîn and the Lord of Apišal.” One manuscript. Old Babylonian, 1800–1700. Akkadian. Conflict between Narām-Sîn and an unnamed ruler of the city of Apišal.
- 13 “Erra and Narām-Sîn.” One manuscript. Old Babylonian, 1800–1700. Akkadian. Erra, the god of Kutha, and Narām-Sîn, the king, join forces to fight unnamed enemies backed by the high god Enlil.
- 14 “Elegy on the Death of Narām-Sîn.” One manuscript. Old Babylonian, 1800–1700. Akkadian. The story of the great deeds of Narām-Sîn is cast in the

- form of a panegyric or praise poem as he descends to Ereškigal, goddess of the underworld.
- 15 “The Great Revolt against Narām-Sîn.” This tale recounts the gathering of the city-states of the northern heartland of the land of Akkade, in particular, their crowning a king, while a separate rebellion begins in the south under two other leaders.
- 15A Exercise. One manuscript. Old Akkadian, 2200. Akkadian.
- 15B–C Two manuscripts. Old Babylonian, 1800–1700. Akkadian.
- 15D “Gula-AN and the Seventeen Kings against Narām-Sîn.” One manuscript. Old Babylonian, 1800–1700. Akkadian.
- 15E One manuscript. Old Hittite/New Script, 1400–1200. Hittite.
- 15F “The Tenth Battle.” One manuscript. Old Babylonian, 1800–1700. Akkadian.
- 16 “Narām-Sîn and the Enemy Hordes.” The ancient title of this legend is “Open the Tablet Box,” referring to the memoirs that Narām-Sîn left for posterity recounting the devastating invasion of Mesopotamia by barbarian hordes, who are creatures of the gods, his disregard of divine omens, his failed attempts to annihilate the enemies, his depression, admonitions from the gods, and his advice to a future ruler.
- 16A–B Two manuscripts. Old Babylonian, 1700–1632. Akkadian.
- 16C Two manuscripts. Middle Babylonian, 1500–1380. Peripheral Akkadian from Hittite capital.
- 16D Five manuscripts. Middle Hittite(?)–Empire Period, 1400–1200. Hittite.
- 16E Eight manuscripts. Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian, 704–539. Akkadian.

The dynasty of Akkade

The rise and fall of the dynasty of Akkade also became the stuff of legends, the paradigmatic model for good or for bad. One composition was created 60 years after its demise: the *Curse over Akkade*, written in Sumerian.⁶ It was the most popular of all Sargonic legends: four manuscripts survive from the period of its composition during the Third Dynasty of Ur (2100–2000) and over a hundred from the Old Babylonian period (1800–1700). The narrative chronicles the rise and prosperity of Akkade, under the kingship of Sargon, bestowed by the high god of Sumer, Enlil, and under the patronage of the goddess Inanna. This period of fortune is followed by one of misfortune caused by the withdrawal of divine favor when Narām-Sîn rules the empire. He falls into a deep depression, turns to the gods for answers, but disregards the divine pronouncements given in the omens. Angrily, he then proceeds to desecrate and plunder Enlil’s temple, the Ekur, and suffers Enlil’s wrath which brings the devastation of the land by the barbarian Guti. The gods offer to save the land by cursing Akkade in its stead.

Oral and Written Transmission

The majority of the extant manuscripts comprising the cycle of Akkade reflect an oral tradition and incidental written compositions.⁷ They are singular, deviant, and improvised unique (*unicum*) manuscripts. Conceived in historical eras during which orality and literacy existed alongside each other,⁸ these written texts may have developed as improvisations based on an oral set of thematic scenes easy to remember.⁹ Their episodic structure reflects a combination of such scenes and *topoi*. These oral building blocks could be varied at will according to the needs of the moment, and modified to suit new purposes and places. In the Sargon texts, two such set *topoi* are the darkening of the sun and the conquest of Simurru which appear in different order according to the manuscript. The former motif seems to have found its way into the Epic of Gilgamesh (George 2003: 20). On the other hand, those texts that begin with what clearly is a paraphrase of royal Sargonic inscriptions may be the result of oral recitation or a literate education.

Such a literate education decisively shaped Mesopotamian attitudes toward the written word and the ideological emphasis on “text.” It also contributed to the literary *topos* of the inscription found in the compositions of these kings. “Open the tablet box and read out the inscription (*narû*) which I, Narām-Sîn, son of Sargon, have inscribed and left for future days,” is the proem of *Narām-Sîn and the Enemy Hordes*. Its conclusion is similar. The assumption is that legendary characters from the past speak to future generations through writing. The reader was warned not to fall into past errors and was encouraged to compile his own written record for posterity so that future generations could be instructed and edified.

On the other hand, that such legends were known orally can be deduced from internal evidence – the words placed in the mouth of Sargon in the Old Assyrian Sargon legend: “Why should I enlarge (upon this theme) on a tablet?” (lines 63–4). In these lines, the author implies that Sargon’s fame is so well established that it does not need to be written down. One cannot emphasize too strongly the existence of oral saga. When the legends are divorced from history and only seen as married to certain social or political conditions, scholars tend to wrench the texts out of their ancient context as written examples of oral saga and leave them stranded in an intertextual environment. In reference to the compositions in the cycle of Akkade, the limitations and constraints of the “texts speaking only to other texts approach” enunciated by Michalowski has been duly criticized by A. Westenholz (1999) and Potts (2001), but is still followed by others (for example, Gilan 2000: 5–6). This approach has led to a futile search for the “original” composition and to viewing the texts as parodies of other texts (van de Mieroop 2000; Foster 2002, 2005).¹⁰

The criticisms leveled against this purely literary approach come from two directions. The first is based on the character of the texts: these are merely modestly written school exercises, more likely reflecting a tradition of oral tales and not necessarily dependent on any particular written text. The second denies the possibility of

intertextuality between literary compositions written down in the Old Babylonian period and Old Akkadian royal inscriptions set up in the innermost courts of temples. A consequence of this second criticism is that it opens the way to seeing these two textual sources as having a common origin in the same past events and thus provides two different windows for viewing them.

The Historicity Question

Historiographical sources, whether historical texts or literary narratives, have come under much scrutiny. Whereas the literary narratives were previously regarded as being equally reliable as historical sources, the validity of any information provided by them has now been questioned. In what follows, I will evaluate the accounts of the events described in the narratives and their relation to Sargonic history, their later interpretations, and their associations with Old Babylonian history.

The events embedded in these heroic narratives are of two types: (1) those known to us from both historical records and literary compositions, and (2) those known to us solely from literary compositions. The first group can be divided into two further subtypes: (1a) those where the historical records and literary compositions agree on the events and (1b) those where they disagree on the events. However, scholarly evaluation of the historical information provided by any of these compositions ranges from reliable to unreliable regardless of the existence of corroborative historical records. Furthermore, it must be emphasized that what is preserved of Sargonic royal inscriptions is statistically very unlikely to represent more than a fraction of the total corpus that was available in antiquity and that, consequently, any argument based on the silence of the sources is invalid. One single new edition of an historical text has provided parallels for a number of elements of an Old Babylonian composition that were previously interpreted as later literary additions. I shall focus here on three representative compositions: (1a) *The Great Revolt against Narām-Sîn*, (1b) *Curse over Akkade*, and (2) *Sargon, King of Battle*.

The Great Revolt against Naram-Sîn

The literary narratives centering on the rebellion of the city-states of southern Mesopotamia against king Narām-Sîn provide a key case for the issue of historicity. They recount the gathering of the city-states of the northern heartland of southern Mesopotamia, and the crowning of Iphur-Kishi of Kish to be king over them. Although mentioned, the separate rebellion under Lugal-Anne of Ur and Amar-girid (wr. gi-in) of Uruk,¹¹ who join the coalition and bring with them the states of the Sumerian south, is not described in any of the extant literary texts. Another composition, *Gula-An and the Seventeen Kings against Narām-Sîn*, picks up the thread and places the conflict on a worldwide stage echoing the Old Akkadian phrase, “when the four quarters of the world rebelled against him.”

Historical sources providing independent external evidence of the events described in *The Great Revolt against Narām-Sîn* include year dates, archival evidence, and building inscriptions contemporary with these events. Copies of the inscriptions on the royal monuments set up by Narām-Sîn in the Ekur, the temple of the high god Enlil in the holy city of Nippur, describing these events, were made during the Old Babylonian period in the first half of the second millennium and in some cases even a millennium and a half later in Babylon (A. Westenholz 2000: 547–8). Continual discoveries and publications have enriched our knowledge of the historical events (e.g., Wilcke 1997). Still, it is necessary to emphasize the paucity of our information. In our present state of knowledge, we can only speculate about the date of this rebellion against Narām-Sîn, whether it occurred early in his reign at the time of his coming to power or, more likely, late in his reign either before or after he undertook the rebuilding of the Ekur.¹²

Scholars assessing the historical reliability of this composition are either skeptical or positivist. For example, Liverani (1993: 59–61) denies any historical relevance and hypothesizes that *The Great Revolt against Narām-Sîn* was composed in the time of a king of Babylon (Sumu-la-el), who was himself at loggerheads with Kish. He maintains that the Akkad model was used to justify actions of kings of Babylon against Kish (Sumu-abum/Sargon and Sumu-la-el/Narām-Sîn). However, historical sources undermine this reconstruction concerning both the Old Akkadian and the Old Babylonian period: neither Sargon nor Sumu-la-el ever campaigned against Kish.¹³ In his discussion of the relationship between the literary tales of *The Great Revolt against Narām-Sîn* and the accounts given of this rebellion in the historical inscriptions, Tinney (1995) ignores historical matters as not worthy of attention and relies on rhetorical style in his attempt to establish the social conditions in which the poems were composed. On the other hand, A. Westenholz (1999: 51–4) attempts to integrate the later traditions regarding the revolt in his presentation of the history of the Old Akkadian period. In a judicious review of all opinions, Potts comes to the conclusion that it increasingly appears arbitrary to exclude the literary traditions from the broad orbit of historical study.

It remains to be demonstrated that it is inherently less probable that these compositions should have drawn on Sargonic traditions to create stories about Sargonic times, than that they should have drawn upon these same Sargonic traditions to create veiled commentaries upon events of later times. (Potts 2001: 405)

An example of a genuine historical element preserved in *The Great Revolt against Narām-Sîn* is a reference to Sargon's magnanimity in liberating the people of Kish after his conquest of Uruk. This was considered an anachronism (Liverani 1993: 60; Tinney 1995: 11; Charpin 1997: 13–14) but is now attested in historical records (Wilcke 1997: 25, 28 ix32–x14). The innovation in the literary texts is the corresponding magnanimity of Narām-Sîn who battles his enemies nine times,¹⁴ sets them free nine times, and in an unhistorical tenth battle (*The Tenth Battle*) finally

annihilates them. This tenth battle could be considered the logical elaboration of an exemplary hero in traditional literature – a characteristic feature that scholars recognize as an obvious deviation from the truth. The process of transformation undergone by literary narratives ranges from simple elaboration to major changes in names of persons and places and geographical and temporal distortions as well as the addition of supplementary building blocks such as folklore *topoi*.

Curse over Akkade

The literary text closest in time to the historical events underlying it is *Curse over Akkade*. It was composed a few generations after the fall of the Akkadian empire when the Third Dynasty of Ur, a Sumerian dynasty, ruled southern Mesopotamia. The only explicitly mentioned historical event, Narām-Sîn's attack on the Ekur, the temple of Enlil, and the subsequent devastation of the land by the barbarian Guti, is palpably false.¹⁵ It cannot be harmonized with those mentioned in historical inscriptions and archival texts. The ahistorical narrative is typically explained as historical by suggesting that the attack was really Narām-Sîn's program of restoring the sacred temenos, which Sumerians considered a sacrilege, and that the devastation happened during the reign of Narām-Sîn's son. The reasons given for the historical distortion usually emphasize Sumerian resentment of Akkade. Still, it is impossible to reconcile the historical events reconstructed from primary sources with the version of Narām-Sîn's reign and Akkade's fall offered in *Curse over Akkade*. Rather than history, *Curse over Akkade* is about religion and politics. It is a tendentious piece of propaganda, which might be used as a social document from which we can extrapolate the historical circumstances and social conditions in which the poem was composed.

This literary text raises with particular urgency the question of historical memory. After all, *Curse over Akkade* was composed within living memory of the historical events. Even so, scholars deduce from this composition that only two kings of Akkade were remembered by later generations: Sargon and his grandson, Narām-Sîn. This statement can be easily disproved (J. Westenholz 2008). While the focus on only two kings might be a feature of orality (A. Westenholz 1999: 23), it is most likely a literary ploy, a judicious choice of two exemplary characters to tell the story. As it was not written to render an account of the past (unless, perhaps, a biased account) but rather to provide a message for the present, this literary composition should not be taken as any kind of evidence for the nature of historical memory. It laid the foundation for a sharp, but only literary, contrast between the prosperous reign of Sargon and the disastrous rule of Narām-Sîn.¹⁶ Even if scholars still follow *Curse over Akkade* in seeing in Narām-Sîn the archetypal *Unheilsherrscher* (see further Glassner 1986: 77–85), the transformations of the characters of Sargon and Narām-Sîn in the literary narratives reflect what Alster has described as the “paradigmatic character of Mesopotamian heroes” in which “historical persons are termed to divest themselves of their own personality and assume the character of mythical heroes” (Alster 1974: 51).

Sargon, King of Battle

This narrative concerning the exploits of Sargon incorporates the story of Sargon's campaign to aid Akkadian merchants in their struggle against Nūr-Dagan, lord of the western Anatolian city of Purušhanda.¹⁷ Although the story was known in Old Babylonian times in the southern Mesopotamian city of Ur,¹⁸ we have written literary compositions only from the Hittite archives in the Middle Babylonian period and later from Assyrian libraries. Opinions on the historicity of this composition range from pure invention to factual history, with all shades in between.

In the extant historical inscriptions, Sargon's major campaigns outside of Mesopotamia led him to the southeast, northeast, and, apparently in a raid, to the northwest along the Euphrates as far as the Silver Mountains and the Cedar Forest (Amanus Mountains). Surprisingly, it is the poorly attested expedition to the north that is glorified in later retellings. Its extension into Anatolia is not corroborated by any historical records. Given such lack of historical confirmation, especially by royal inscriptions or date formulae, the historicity of the campaign to Purušhanda has been attacked either by concluding that the event itself did not occur at all and is a fabrication of a later age, or by accepting the event as historical but attributing it to later kings and/or a later political situation.

The later king most commonly assigned the role of Sargon is Narām-Sîn and it is his conquest of settlements on the Upper Euphrates, in particular, Hahhum and Talhadum, that is said to be reflected in the literary composition (J. Westenholz 1998: 10–14). The second candidate is his namesake, the Old Assyrian king Sargon I (Hallo and Simpson 1971: 94; 1997: 89; Hallo 1998: 118), of whom relatively little is known, but Old Assyrian trade in Anatolia provides an historical context (Franke 1995: 837). Further, the fact that two Old Assyrian kings, Sargon and Narām-Sîn, were named after the Old Akkadian rulers is clear evidence that at least these members of the Puzur-Aššur dynasty identified themselves with the Akkadian rulers. Finally, the role of Sargon could have been embodied by Samsī-Addu, the Amorite king of Upper Mesopotamia (1813–1781). Archaeological evidence of the extent of the authority of Samsī-Addu in Anatolia is provided by a number of bullae with his inscribed cylinder seal impressions and those of his officials, found at the site of Acemhöyük in central Anatolia. As a matter of fact, the only ruler who is credited with the subjugation of Purušhanda is the semi-legendary eighteenth-century Hittite king Anitta.

Nevertheless, ancient traditions held that Sargon conquered Hahhum, situated on the Euphrates, which marked the border with Anatolia (Barjamovic 2005: 78–98). The Old Assyrian legend of Sargon relates that he made the garments of the Hahha'ans sumptuous (line 62). The Hittite King Hattušili I (1650–1620) called attention to Sargon's crossing of the Euphrates and defeating the troops of Hahhum (Barjamovic 2005: 92–3 with references). The historical detail of the crossing of the Euphrates occurs in Nūr-Dagan's boast that Sargon will not be able to reach his realm because the riverbank and high water will prevent him from crossing. Thus,

while it is most probable that Sargon captured Hahhum, the pivotal question is whether he reached the city of Purušhanda.

The geographical location of this city is debated.¹⁹ It is known from Old Assyrian (1900–1800) and Old Hittite (1650–1500) sources as Purušhattum and Parsuhanda respectively. Old Assyrian Purušhattum was the terminus of the two main Assyrian routes beyond which merchants seldom, if ever, traveled. Although a Hittite scribe might exchange Sargon's historical conquest of Hurrian Simurru with a fictive conquest of Anatolian Purušhanda in order to make the story more relevant to a Hittite audience, such an explanation would not account for its occurrence 100 years before the Old Hittite period in the fictive letter from Ur. Surprisingly, it is not mentioned among the other Anatolian cities in the Old Assyrian Sargon legend. Since we know of Old Akkadian inscriptions copied in Ur, it is not impossible that the notion of Sargon's march to Purušhanda was found in one of these inscriptions. At present, it seems most probable that Purušhanda represents the limit of the known world (Glassner 1985: 125–6). The quintessential motif of the Sargon cycle of stories was the exploration of the unknown – to go where no one has gone before (J. Westenholz 1983: 333). It filters down into the first-millennium compositions *Babylonian Map of the World* and *The Sargon Geography*, a description of the empire of Sargon of Akkade.

Circumstances of Composition and Historicity

A popular approach to historiographic narrative is text-centered, focusing on its possible author, its aims and its culture (Liverani 1993: 44). Such conjectures concerning “the author” of the “text” (48), the historical juncture, and the communicative aims take no cognizance of the possibility of the “text” being a written improvisation based on oral saga. Speculation is rife considering what little is actually known of the circumstances of the composition of these narratives. Given that the date of the written composition of the narrative tales about the Sargonic kings has commonly been assessed on the basis of assumptions about the authors, environments, purposes, and audiences,²⁰ scholars are in danger of falling into a circular argument and reconstructing these factors on the basis of their assumptions about the date. Van de Mieroop comments more thoughtfully on the need to focus on dates of manuscripts (1999b: 329). He delineates three types: newly composed, verbatim copies of earlier texts, or reworkings of something earlier. While suggesting that in all three cases the texts still had meaning for the society for which the manuscripts were written, he concludes that any “attempts at reconstructing why particular stories about Sargon had been composed remain highly tentative in themselves” (1999a: 61).

Although most manuscripts are undated, their possible dates can be extrapolated from archaeological findspots and paleography. The circumstances of discovery throw some light on the conditions of composition. The first composition on the theme of the revolt against Narām-Sîn was written in the Old Akkadian period, shortly after his reign. This crossed-out improvised text with erasures was found outside a private

house in the city of Ešnunna, evidently thrown out as refuse in the area between two houses (J. Westenholz 1997: 224). It was a botched composition, probably made by a student, possibly as an exercise in writing.

The four manuscripts of *Curse over Akkade* stemming from its period of composition during the Third Dynasty of Ur²¹ were discovered in the temple dedicated to the goddess Inanna in the city of Nippur but in a late fill of the platform underneath the Parthian temple.²² Although the Inanna Temple does not seem to be the place of composition, since these fragments cannot be the sole direct ancestor of the Nippur tradition of the Old Babylonian manuscripts (Cooper 1983: 44), the circumstances of discovery do demonstrate some relationship between the Inanna Temple and the composition, as do the last words: “Praise to Inanna” (line 281). The composition of this narrative is commonly ascribed to the priests of Enlil, prompted by their negative attitudes towards Narām-Sîn whose impiety is demonstrated in the composition by his refusal to accept the verdict of the omens (e.g., Glassner 1986: 75–6, 84–5, 87, 93). Cooper (1983: 11) proposed that since the text explains the fall of a great empire in religious terms, it was composed in a priestly milieu. Without any evidence, it is also maintained that *Curse over Akkade* is a piece of political propaganda written in scribal halls. According to Michalowski, *Curse over Akkade* is a completely fictitious poetic depiction of the fall of the Akkadian state:

The events which were distorted in this text were well within the reach of human memory and it is particularly interesting that the school tradition was already manipulating history for propagandistic purposes, imposing the big lie upon the future officials of the state.

The evidence of the texts does not support Michalowski’s contention; it reveals two distinct sets of circumstances: Ur III composition in clerical circles vis-à-vis Old Babylonian transmission in the scribal halls.

Chronologically, the next composition was written on a tablet discovered – and probably written – in Anatolia within the community of Assyrian merchants. Cavigneaux (2005: 596) imagines the circumstances of improvised composition: “Le nouveau texte . . . suggère de manière très concrète que les marchands assyriens berçaient leurs soirées au coin de la cheminée, au long des hivers anatoliens, d’histoires dont les rois d’Akkad étaient les héros.” For this reason, he sees the text as a *unicum*, with hardly any chance of ever finding a duplicate (597). The tablet looks very much like the business letters with which it was found (Alster and Oshima 2007: 1). The text itself is squeezed onto the tablet and looks as if the writer concluded his tale quite abruptly as he ran out of space. It was discovered in the house of Ah-šalim, an ordinary merchant, which was destroyed in about 1836, 500 years after the reign of Sargon. This text partially reflects the contemporaneous political situation – the captured “princes” bear the usual Old Assyrian designation of local Anatolian heads of state (van de Mieroop 2000: 149), but Sargon is given his full Old Akkadian titulary. The four *topoi* in the text derive from Old Akkadian royal inscriptions as well as Sumerian court compositions from the Third Dynasty of

Ur. The swiftness attributed to Sargon in the first feat – he could catch a gazelle (the symbol of swiftness *par excellence*) before a mudbrick could dissolve in water – is a boast in the best tradition of Sumerian self-laudatory poetry (Dercksen 2005: 10–11). The second feat elaborates on the motif of the King's Table. This theme obviously was taken from a tradition going back to Sargon's boast in his own inscriptions that 5,400 soldiers daily ate bread in his presence. The last two *topoi* known from other Sargon legends appear here as well: the travel through darkness and the catalogue of conquered peoples who geographically extend from Iran to Cyprus but have a decidedly northern orientation (van de Mieroop 2000). This text tells us little if anything concerning the circumstances of its composition or the commercial society in which it was written.

Circumstances of the written composition of manuscripts stemming from the Old Babylonian period are mostly unknown; their provenance, even of those found in controlled excavations, has been lost or was never published. Very few manuscripts containing stories of Narām-Sîn have definite circumstances of discovery. *The Elegy on the Death of Narām-Sîn* was found in a room of the Ebabbar Temple dedicated to the sun-god Šamaš and indeed in the composition, Narām-Sîn is compared to Šamaš.

One version of *The Great Revolt against Narām-Sîn* was found in a room in the palace in the city of Mari in a mixed archive. There is no reason not to assume that this text was written in Mari (Charpin 1997: 17), since this is not the only example of interest in Akkadian lore attested there. Other discoveries include a copy of a royal inscription of Narām-Sîn (Charpin 1984: 49–50) and a ritual text listing *kispum*-offerings²³ to statues of Sargon and Narām-Sîn (Biro 1980: 139–50; Durand and Guichard 1997: 28, 43, 66–70). It is highly probable that all these texts were written during the domination of that city by Samsī-Addu, given his Akkadian connections and assumed origins.²⁴ In general, Samsī-Addu thought of himself as the successor of the empire of Akkad and its universal sovereignty, and attempted to legitimate his regime through the employment of the memory of the Akkadian rulers (J. Westenholz 2004: 12–14). In the case of the Mari version of *The Great Revolt against Narām-Sîn*, it might have been written down at that time and place to parallel Samsī-Addu's efforts to put down various revolts in the territories under his command with those of Narām-Sîn who was finally victorious. But the text itself is apparently unfinished. Why was it kept? Perhaps it represents only notes for a ritual recitation during the *kispum* ceremonies.

The composition entitled *Sargon, King of Battle* was first written down in the second half of the second millennium. Both the Hittite and the Akkadian manuscripts have definite findspots. The Akkadian text was found in a house in the short-lived Egyptian capital at el-Amarna (c. 1350) but is dated according to its paleography to the late Middle Hittite period, the late fifteenth or early fourteenth century (Beckman *apud* J. Westenholz 1997: 105). Yet its place of writing is unresolved. It could have been imported directly from the Hittite capital of Hattuša (Beckman 2001: 88) or it could be a local copy of an imported text either from the capital or from Hittite-influenced North Syria (Edzard 1988: 32; Izre'el 1997: 10–11; Gilan 2000: 27–8, 104). There could even have been a Hittite-run school in Amarna

(Edzard 1988: 31). Foster (1988: 15) surmises that the Hittites liked the story because it was set in Anatolia, their homeland, and when they sent off educational materials to Egypt, to help hapless Egyptians with their Akkadian, they included a version of this legend. The Hittite texts were discovered in the magazine of the Great Temple and in the House on the Slope in which there may have been an archive for religious texts (Gilan 2000: 34 n. 206), perhaps indicating a religious motive for their preservation. Their archaeological context and paleographical arguments suggest a date sometime in the thirteenth century (Gilan 2000: 54).²⁵

Scholars attempting to ascertain the circumstances in which it was written always place the composition of *Sargon, King of Battle* in the first half of the second millennium, a period from which no written exemplars are preserved. Liverani (1993: 52–6) proposed that the appropriate historical context for the composition is provided by the (unsubstantiated) debates regarding the resumption of trade with Anatolia in the time of Samsī-Addu.

According to Liverani, this story about Sargon's rescue of his merchants at Puruṣhanda was invented as an argument in a debate in the city council at Assur under Samsī-Addu – the real “Sargon” . . . Liverani does not explain how such a background paper for an executive meeting in Assur could become literary tradition among Babylonians and Hittites, nor how a piece of brand-new fiction could convince anybody among the practical-minded City Fathers of Assur. (A. Westenholz 1999: 22)

While Liverani (2001/2: 180) objected to this derisive criticism, he did not answer the objections raised concerning his theories. Van de Mieroop (1999a: 68) also notes that, considering the absence of written manuscripts from Samsī-Addu's days, Liverani's suggestion is difficult to prove. While it is most reasonable to place the Mari recension of *The Great Revolt against Narām-Sîn* in the court of Samsī-Addu, there is little compelling reason to add *Sargon, King of Battle* to the literary production of his court poets. Basing himself on the fact that, in general, Akkadian versions of Old Hittite historical texts seem to show features of Mari Akkadian and therefore there must have been close connections between Old Hittite and North Syrian literatures, Gilan (2000: 106–7) concluded that *Sargon, King of Battle*, was transmitted to the Hittites via Mari in written form. Nevertheless, he offered an even better reason for placing the Hittite recension of this narrative in the period of the Hittite king Muršili I (1620–1590) who conquered Aleppo and sacked Babylon in 1595 (108). The composition would thus compare the Hittite king's ambitious march with Sargon's campaign far into Anatolia. Another opinion is that of Vanstiphout (1998: 583) that the story coincided with the rise of Hittite hegemony in 1430.²⁶

Oral traditions provide another avenue of approach to the topic of the composition of the tale *Sargon, King of Battle*. As the Old Assyrian Sargon poem reveals, the Old Assyrian merchants were interested in Sargon lore. One scenario might be that a storyteller from among the Assyrian merchants decided to insert the merchants in the story of *Sargon, King of Battle* and this version was popular in Anatolia and Assyria. Thus, the Sargon tales could have been modified or created

to appeal to local audiences (van de Mieroop 2000: 158).²⁷ A valid hypothesis would be that these versions were handed down orally in Anatolia from the time of the Old Assyrian period to the Hittite conquest (c. 1750). To remain in the collective memory for less than a hundred years is not unrealistic. Furthermore, the Hittite rulers originated in the same place as the Old Assyrian Sargon composition. As van de Mieroop (2000: 158) has persuasively argued, the Hittites identified themselves with the Akkadians. In particular, the self-identification of a Hittite sovereign with his Akkadian forerunner is made explicit in a passage from the Annals of King Hattušili I where Hattušili contrasts his crossing of the Euphrates river to conquer Hahhum with a similar deed of Sargon (Beckman 2001: 91). A similar comparison is said to be implicit in the Anitta literary narrative in which the conflict between the Hittites and Purušhanda is recounted based on oral traditions. Yakubovich (2008: 306) believes that the hostility of the Hittites to the kingdom of Purušhanda explains the innovative setting of *Sargon, King of Battle*, and that it represents a mythical retrojection of the historical deeds of Anitta, whose military campaigns likewise resulted in the submission of Purušhanda. Yakubovich thus places the composition in the courts of the later Hittite kings. In addition to *Sargon, King of Battle*, manuscripts of *The Great Revolt against Narām-Sîn* and *Narām-Sîn and the Enemy Hordes* in both Hittite and Akkadian were also found in Hattuša. As Beckman (2001: 89) observed, the deeds of the Sargonic rulers tied local Anatolian history to that of the wider world and thus provided the political impetus for the written composition of narrative tales that had been transmitted orally.

From the first millennium, a much-abbreviated version of *Narām-Sîn and the Enemy Hordes*, fragments of *Sargon, King of Battle* and a new composition on the birth of Sargon have survived. These compositions present standardized written texts, found in the capitals of the highlands of northern Mesopotamia in the Neo-Assyrian period in the eighth and seventh centuries and in the cities of the plains of southern Mesopotamia in the Neo-Babylonian period in the sixth century. One manuscript of *Narām-Sîn and the Enemy Hordes* can be proven from its archaeological findspot to have been part of the library of the last great king of Assyria, Aššurbanipal (668–627), at his capital at Nineveh (J. Westenholz 1997: 296–7). Catalogues of this library refer not only to this composition but also to two others of Sargon that have not survived the ravages of time. Another manuscript was discovered at Huzirina (modern Sultantepe), on the plain of Harran, in the library of a priest of Zababa by the name of Qurdi-Nergal (J. Westenholz 1997: 297).

A new literary narrative, a wisdom text with the *Sargon Birth Legend* as the frame, is alleged to have been composed at a specific point in history. This narrative is a patchwork of *topoi*: The first is the folktale motif of the birth of the hero – the child who is abandoned at birth and brought up in humble surroundings, yet finally succeeds to his proper inheritance (Lewis 1980: 149–272). Second, Sargon boasts of his extraordinary feats in a tersely recounted list. Finally, Sargon addresses posterity in the form of a challenge to future kings, which echoes the conclusion of the Old Babylonian Sargon compositions. The narrative then develops into an exhortation on the futility of such endeavors. The question is when the current version was

committed to writing, thus entering the stream of literary tradition. The impetus for the new composition is said to have been a self-representation of Sargon II of Assyria (721–705; Galter 2006: 7). He could be the future ruler addressed by Sargon to go where he had gone. Sargon of Akkade, “king of the universe,” is presented as having reached the outer limits of the earth in the *Sargon Birth Legend*. To delineate the limits of that empire, the court scribes of Sargon II are credited with compiling *The Sargon Geography* by synthesizing various sources, some much older and others contemporary (Horowitz 1998: 67–95). Thus, under Sargon II of Assyria, Sargonic lore could have been reused to glorify the ancient ruler and present him as the inspiration of the current one. Consequently, it is tempting to place the fixation in writing of the Sargonic legends in his reign. However, the fact that the beginning of the text has survived on a Neo-Babylonian school tablet indicates that there was a similar written tradition in Babylonia. It is generally acknowledged that the Babylonian tradition formed the basis of the copies of texts in Aššurbanipal’s library and that it is most implausible that an Assyrian manuscript would be copied in Babylonia (J. Westenholz 1984: 73–6, 78).²⁸ This is one more outstanding example of the continuously evolving oral and written tradition around the archetypal hero, Sargon of Akkade. From over a millennium earlier, hints of a birth legend about Sargon are found in the passage on his parentage in the *Sumerian King List* and a fragmentary baby story in the *Sumerian Legend of Sargon*.

Social Conditions, Political Context and Historicity

Another widespread approach concentrates not on the historical moment but on the social milieu in which compositions were written. For example, Gilan (2000) investigates the question of whether the Hittite versions of *Sargon, King of Battle*, are related chronologically and thematically to the political and cultural agenda of the Old Hittite period. Taking this to an extreme, Tinney (1995: 14) declares:

It should be equally obvious that texts such as the Old Babylonian narrative concerning the Great Revolt may be used to illuminate the socio-political background of the Old Babylonian period itself, but have no place in the reconstruction of the events of the Old Akkadian period.

Yet, his own conclusions regarding Old Babylonian features of *The Great Revolt against Narām-Sîn* have been undermined by a later edition of an Old Akkadian royal inscription. Potts’s comment on these views has been quoted earlier (2001: 405).

Many of the Akkadian sagas are said to contain an economic motif in the deep structure of the composition. This understanding is not limited to the one text that explicitly mentions merchants, *Sargon, King of Battle*. For example, Jonker (1995: 132) proposed that *The Great Revolt against Narām-Sîn* is concerned with the reestablishment of trade routes in the Old Babylonian period. Certainly, trade was

essential to resource-poor Mesopotamia and the merchant was the central mediator of this trade. The capture of foreign merchants was mentioned in Old Akkadian royal inscriptions (Frayne 1993: 89, vi 2'–3'). Sargon established a trade network to the south and supported a flourishing trade through the Gulf (ibid. 28, 2.1.11 lines 9–13), and a mercantile weight with the name of a late Old Akkadian king was found at a site in southeastern Turkey (ibid. 214). It has been assumed that the military activities of the Akkadian kings aimed to control the Near Eastern trade routes. Nevertheless, it remains to be demonstrated whether it is legitimate to see an economic motif in all the Sargonic epics. One composition that contradicts this supposition is the Old Assyrian Sargon legend which, although written by a merchant, makes no mention of trade or merchants – there is no way of inserting an economic motif between the lines of this composition. As Alster and Oshima (2007: 7 n. 41) state bluntly: “Merchants did not always talk about money!” In contrast, the Sumerian *Curse over Akkade* paints a vibrant picture of Akkadian prosperity describing the trade caravans coming from east, west, and north as well as the ships laden with goods from the south. A fragment of a large epic narrative dating from the Old Hittite period speaks of merchants and contains a description of wealth (Hoffner 1968/69; Gilan 2000: 73–5). Despite this socio-economic background, Gilan (103) proposes that the appearance of the merchants in the Sargon story could be interpreted as a literary construction to invest the story with a semblance of truth.

The search for a political context is no less speculative, whether it be general or specific. In general, the narratives of the cycle of Akkad are considered treatises on the theory and practice of kingship in Babylonia (Tinney 1995: 14) and in Hatti (Gilan 2000: 107). Heroic tales can be used as a subtle criticism of and positive or negative comment on the state of contemporary affairs. They are commonly understood as propaganda, for instance, to function as paradigms for justifying the military campaigns of later rulers.²⁹ Did Neo-Assyrian kings legitimize their policies of conquest by referring to Sargon? According to *Narām-Sîn and the Enemy Hordes*, the ideal king should be a humble and peaceful shepherd of his people providing security and defense rather than exposing them to the dangers of war.

Liverani (1993: 51) posits for the Sargonic narratives specific Old Babylonian political kernels overlaid by Akkadian literary coloring, but his reconstructions are either implausible or impossible to prove. Tinney applied this approach to *The Great Revolt against Narām-Sîn*. Because it attributes the origins of Iphur-Kishi's kingship neither to divine authority nor to birthright but to local “tribal” consensus, he proposed as the political context Mesopotamia in the early second millennium. Yet this political scenario was undermined by the discovery of an identical account in the royal inscriptions of Narām-Sîn.³⁰ Since *Narām-Sîn and the Enemy Hordes* does not reflect the Old Akkadian royal inscriptions, in word or in deed, it is one saga that could have been composed with a political purpose. The occurrence of negative omens recorded during the reign of Samsī-Addu³¹ plus the mention of Shubat-Enlil, Samsī-Addu's royal residence, in the standard text of this saga ties it to Samsī-Addu. Samsī-Addu fits the character profile of the successful and arrogant, audacious, impious, and bold king. Thus we might view *The Great Revolt against Narām-Sîn* and *Narām-Sîn and*

the *Enemy Hordes* as two reflections on the characters of Narām-Sîn and Samsī-Addu, the former positive and the latter negative.

Yet in form the latter composition is a piece of *narû*-genre literature,³² framed by the unknown composer as a commemorative monument. The most famous *narû* monument of all times is that of Hammurabi, king of Babylon (1792–1750), containing the so-called law code, which probably originally stood in the temple of Šamaš in Sippar. The author of *Narām-Sîn and the Enemy Hordes* has not only been innovative in reworking the legends of Narām-Sîn – both *The Great Revolt against the King Naram-Sîn* and *Gula-An and the Seventeen Kings against Narām-Sîn* – but also in using the Hammurabi *narû*-text as his theme. The leitmotif of inscribing one's memoirs on a *narû* for future generations to read, in order that they should bless the owner, occurs for the first time in the conclusion of Hammurabi's monument. This might suggest a post-Hammurabi date for *Narām-Sîn and the Enemy Hordes* – which would also indicate that it was composed after the reign of Samsī-Addu. It is a paradox that, when we have a clear literary invention as well as a *terminus ante quem* for the writing of the second tablet that is dated to the fourteenth year of the reign of the Babylonian king Ammisaduqa (1646–1626), we cannot explain the circumstances of its composition.

Function and Role of Akkadian Heroic Tales in Mesopotamian Society

One primary function of written compositions was education in order to familiarize the student with Akkadian writing, literature, and history. While the Neo-Babylonian student exercises demonstrate that in this period the narratives were part of the standard education, most third- and second-millennia manuscripts, because of their uniqueness, poor spelling and composition, can only have been humble counterparts. Exceptionally, a few pieces of second-millennium schoolwork were actually discovered with other school tablets. The Sargon letter from Nippur is written on a Type II/1 school tablet in which the letter appears on the obverse and a lexical extract on the reverse.³³ The student, who wrote the Sargon letter on the obverse, had already demonstrated his competence in the thematic list *Proto-Lu*, a list of titles and other designations for human beings. It formed part of phase 3 of his elementary education. The *Sumerian Sargon Legend* and *Curse over Akkade* were discovered in the same house (Robson 2001: 56). Hence these two works of literature formed part of the advanced education of the Sumerian scribes.

Pleasure and entertainment were other functions of these narratives. The sagas could have been written for the personal pleasure of a scribe in his off-hours, just as the Old Assyrian composition was an improvisation made during his leisure time by a merchant. Conversely, the singer entertained the public with his oral performances. The entertainment function is closely integrated into its social function of preserving and glorifying the culture by anchoring the present in the past (Russo 1992: 9).

Composed for public consumption, these narratives provided educational and ideological instruction. Like other heroic tales, the Akkadian sagas were digests of moral principles, such as honor, bravery, civility, and piety, that were reinforced by the poetry and were therefore to be esteemed as well as enjoyed. The compositions became more didactic and their moral message more obvious with time. In all the Sargonic texts, the underlying themes are loyalty and honor. The enemies have acted ignobly: they have returned evil for good. As Foster (1988: 17) states,

In Mesopotamia, historiography is the past we ought to know; legends are the past we ought to learn from. Our legends evolved from heroism to wisdom as Mesopotamian civilization matured and declined. In the end, legends became the lessons of history.

Oral recitations of these legends might have taken place in a cultic context. As emphasized in *Narām-Sîn and the Enemy Hordes*, it was the responsibility of descendants to propagate the memory of their ancestors in memorial *kispum* ceremonies that included invoking their names. The final line of the Old Assyrian Sargon Legend requests that future generations increase the regular offerings to Sargon. From generation to generation in Mesopotamia, cult images of the Sargonic kings received offerings. At these annual memorial ceremonies, it is most likely that the invocation of the names of the Sargonic kings was accompanied by recitation of oral (and written?) narratives.³⁴ For example, Dercksen (2005: 121–3) proposes that the Old Assyrian Sargon legend “functioned to extol Sargon of Akkade during *kispum* celebrations that were part of the official cult of Assur,” and Durand and Guichard (1997: 43) suggest that *The Great Revolt against Narām-Sîn* was recited at the *kispum* ceremonies in Mari. The actors in these sagas would thus have been translated from history into legend by becoming archetypal heroes and the subjects of a cult and/or a tale.

Any approach to these texts should therefore incorporate their multi-dimensionality – their educational, literary, political, economic, cultic, and even purely entertaining function – without losing sight of their historical dimension (Potts 2001: 405).

Conclusion

The Sargonic sagas reveal the complex manipulation of historical events in Akkadian heroic traditions. Modern scholarly attitudes to this tradition can easily be reduced to a few common traits, seeing it as propaganda in one way or another, as comment on current affairs, as literature pure and simple, or, most likely, as *bona fide* saga that is as historical or unhistorical as any other saga tradition. Based on our current knowledge, it is impossible to answer the question of how much in it might be history and how much simply exemplary. The written documents that have survived the millennia represent a very small number of concrete realizations of the legends found in the Akkadian oral traditions and a handful of royal inscriptions. While we are unable to affirm the literal historicity of particular elements in the literary narratives, in many cases we are also unable to deny it.

Furthermore, any future approach to these texts should also consider the Mesopotamian conception of the exemplary value of history (Cooper 1991/2: 173).³⁵ The cycle of legendary stories about the Old Akkadian monarchs is “historical” in the sense that the narratives offer examples of how history was and always should be. As recorded in an omen, Sargon was, like Arthur, the once and future king: *šanāte Šarru-kēn ina māti ušabšā*, “he will make the years of Sargon recur in the land” (Leichty 1970: 82, 94).

Notes

- 1 The absolute chronology of the third and second millennia in the ancient Near East is exceptionally controversial. While the relative dating of the reigns of these kings is certain, the absolute dating is debated ranging from high to low chronologies with differences of a few hundred years. For the sake of convenience in this chapter, the so-called Middle Chronology has been employed as a relative historical dating system. The following dates are used: Old Akkadian period (2334–2154), Third Dynasty of Ur (2112–2004), Old Babylonian (2003–1595), Middle Babylonian (c. 1500–1000) in southern Mesopotamia and Old Assyrian (c. 2000–1813) and Neo-Assyrian (911–609) in northern Mesopotamia. All dates in this chapter are BCE.
- 2 While no one has seriously questioned the application of the term “epic” or “heroic epic” to the various Sumerian compositions discussed by Piotr Michalowski (this volume), the corresponding Akkadian literary works have been the subject of an extensive, even futile terminological debate (J. Westenholz 1983: 327; 1997: 16–24). The most recent idiosyncratic definition of Mesopotamian epic by Noegel (2005: 233) is based on content: “all poetic narratives that praise the accomplishments of a heroic figure or history or tradition.” Nevertheless, he excludes the *Nārām-Sîn* sagas because of their form as “pseudo-autobiographical texts.”
- 3 This saga tradition is considered the “Sargon Epos,” according to Hecker’s analysis (1974: 36), and is so treated by Glassner 1985 and Vanstiphout 1998. Vanstiphout proposes a common ancestry for all the Sargon texts.
- 4 The edition of the following texts can be found in J. Westenholz 1997 with the exception of: (3) Cooper and Heimpel 1983, (5) Alster and Oshima 2007 with notes by J. Westenholz 2007, and (9A) Gilan 2000 and Rieken 2001.
- 5 The edition of the following texts can be found in J. Westenholz 1997 with the addition of a fragment to be joined to 15B (see Charpin 1997) and with the exception of (15E) Güterbock 1938: 66–80 and (16D) Güterbock 1938: 49–65.
- 6 For the latest textual edition, see Black et al. 1998–2006, 2.1.5, to which should be added Ur Excavation Texts 6/3 741, see Zólyomi 2006: 63–4, no. 65/1. For the list of Ur III and Old Babylonian manuscripts, see van de Mieroop in progress.
- 7 For a discussion of the term “oral” and its five aspects, see J. Westenholz 1992: 124–5. As demonstrated there, the variants in the manuscripts of the Great Revolt cannot be explained by means of a traditional stemma based on an authoritative text, but must reflect the existence of oral tales.
- 8 For a description of the oral medium for Old Akkadian literature, see A. Westenholz 1974–7: 108–9.

- 9 For a critique of theme as a major component of traditional oral composition, see Russo 1992: 16–17.
- 10 For a more judicious assessment of the intertextual approach applied to the Sargonic sagas, see Alster and Oshima 2007: 6 n. 37, 7 n. 44.
- 11 One text (15C) collapses these two persons into Lugal-Anne of Uruk. For an interesting explanation of the confusion between Ur and Uruk as the city of Lugal-Anne, see Potts 2001: 398–9 n. 9.
- 12 Most probably the rebuilding was a part of an extensive program of temple restorations made in gratitude for his victory in the rebellion; Nārām-Sîn was thus prevented from completing the rebuilding of Ekur by his death, not by the rebellion (A. Westenholz 1999: 46, 51–4; 2000: 552–6).
- 13 For the problems in this reconstruction of Old Babylonian history, see Charpin 1997: 16.
- 14 For the historical nine battles, see A. Westenholz 1999: 53.
- 15 For an overview of previous uses of *Curse over Akkade* as an historical source, see Cooper 1983: 10–11; 2001: 132–3, 140–2. For a discussion of possible ways in which this and other events in this literary text might reflect history, see Glassner 1986: 71–3.
- 16 The rise and fall of these two kings also became the historical paradigm for the rise and fall of a dynasty; see Glassner 1997: 107–8.
- 17 One of the issues concerning the historicity of this text is the name of the king of Purušhanda which is spelled out in various manuscripts as: Nu-ur-dag-gal (Akkadian, Amarna rev. 6'), Nu-úr-da-ah-hi (Hittite *KBo* 22 6 i 21), Nu-ur-da-ga[-an..] (Hittite *KBo* 13 46 obv. ? ii 8'), ZALAG-^dDa-gan (Akkadian, Assur 3). Whereas the last is a good Akkadian name, “Light of Dagan,” and Dagan is the high god of the region of Upper Mesopotamia, the earlier versions seem to be either scribal mistakes (the sign GAN understood by the Hittite scribe as HI) or fanciful names. Many theories have been put forth to explain this confusion. An attractive suggestion has been made that Nūr-dahhi is a distortion of the Hurrian name, Nawar-tahhe, “Man of Nawar,” a name attested in other sources (Archi 2000). This suggestion is in accord with evidence of a Hurrian Sargonic tradition and possible Hurrian transmission to the Hittites. However, this suggestion is undermined by the forgotten second Hittite manuscript. Nevertheless, this Hurrian theory is now assumed and discussed. A recent example is: “It is hard for me to believe that Hurrians claiming their connection with the kingdom of Nawar established themselves on the Konya Plain by the twenty-fourth century BC (cf. Richter 2004: 290–1). In addition to this, G. Torri turned my attention to Sargon’s crossing of the Tigris in an episode that precedes his engagement with Nur-dahhi. It would have been logical for the Akkadian king to cross the Tigris on his way to a Hurrian land in the Zagros mountains, but it would have been quite a detour if the goal of his campaign had been Asia Minor” (Yakubovich 2008: 305).
- 18 In an Old Babylonian apocryphal letter (no. 11 in the list above), Sargon mentions his desire to capture Purušhanda.
- 19 See most recently Kawakami 2006 with references; Gilan 2000: 93–8, both of whom believe that Purušhanda is to be identified with Acemhöyük. For an argument to the contrary and the most complete references to Old Assyrian Purušhattum, see the discussion by Barjamovic 2005: 368–99. In the colony Ib period, the time of Samsī-Addu, the entire western part of the Assyrian network of colonies, including Purušhattum, disappears from the Old Assyrian records but it is mentioned as a source for pistachios

- in a contemporary Babylonian text from the city of Mari (Durand 2001: 129–32). For references to Old Hittite Parsuhanda, see Gilan 2000: 60–1, 94–7; Barjamovic 2005: 397–8. Note that there was no settlement at Acemhöyük in the Hittite period.
- 20 This approach is applied most consistently by Liverani and Tinney. For a critical review of this approach, see Hallo 1998: 117.
 - 21 In this discussion I ignore the erroneous hypothesis that *Curse over Akkade* was created as anti-Akkadian propaganda by Išme-Dagan of Isin around 1950 (Liverani 1993: 56–9), since the evidence of the earlier manuscripts negates it.
 - 22 For the findspot of one manuscript as SB 76, see Alster 1993: 2. For the description of the whole archive found in locus SB, see Zettler 1992: 91–2.
 - 23 In general, the *kispum*-offering is a funerary offering but also a component of the memorial ceremonies performed as part of the ancestor cult, in particular of the royal family. During these ceremonies each family remembered the dead, offering food and drink to their ancestors and asking them for blessings. The cult of the dead played a central role in state and family religion in Mesopotamia from the third millennium through the time of the Assyrians and Babylonians in the first millennium BCE.
 - 24 On the massive preoccupation with the memory of the Old Akkadian kings by Samsī-Addu whose forefathers are thought to have links with the city of Akkade, see most recently Charpin 2004: 149–50.
 - 25 Note that Rieken (2001: 583) now dates the Hittite version of *Sargon King of Battle* to an earlier written forerunner from the Middle Hittite period.
 - 26 According to Vanstiphout, the theme of the Old Babylonian story line of *Sargon King of Battle* was reshaped in the Middle Babylonian period and during this revision the geographical setting was shifted from northeast Mesopotamia to far west Anatolia due to the importance of the Hittite kingdom.
 - 27 An invented new composition found as yet only in Hittite is the tale of Gurparanzah the son-in-law of Impakru king of Akkad; see Daddi 2003. It was discovered in the library of the Great Temple, and belonged to the genre of “songs.”
 - 28 This statement also applies to *The Sargon Geography* which also has a Neo-Babylonian copy, written in the city of Sippar. The only reasonable scenario that would have these two compositions committed to writing under Sargon II of Assyria would be after his reconquest of Babylon in 710 and in support of Sargon’s pro-Babylonian policy.
 - 29 For a summary of various opinions, see Noegel 2005: 243–4.
 - 30 For a critical discussion of Tinney’s view, see A. Westenholz 1999: 21–2.
 - 31 Regarding the omens taken in reference to the outcome of the revolt of Lidaya and the Turukkeans, see Charpin and Ziegler 2003: 148.
 - 32 For a discussion of this genre, see J. Westenholz 1997: 16–20. I discuss this in more detail in an as yet unpublished paper, “*Narû*-literature: Its Applicability to Genre Research,” presented in 1995 at a conference on “Genre in Mesopotamian Literature,” held at Groningen University in the Netherlands.
 - 33 Identification of formats of school tablets is based on Miguel Civil’s publications, e.g., 1995: 2308; concerning this letter, see Veldhuis 1997: 66.
 - 34 Jonker 1995; Hallo 1998: 120–1; Gilan 2000: 21–2.
 - 35 Similarly, “historical events are worth memorizing only insofar as they can be viewed as repeating a paradigmatic pattern” (Alster 1974: 51).

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Epic and History in Hittite Anatolia: In Search of a Local Hero

AMIR GILAN

In memory of Julia Orlamünde, a true hero¹

In his recent discussion of epic as genre, Richard Martin (2005) suggests a communicative, relational approach to epic instead of a formal definition based on features of content or style. Discussing contemporary epic traditions, Martin argues that epic cannot be pinned down to a specific textual or performance style, or to a specific setting or occasion of performance. Epic can be performed in almost every situation and is intricately interwoven with myths, folktales, wisdom-proverbs and praise-poetry. Epic can interact with and incorporate all these forms, yet it surpasses them by its ambition. It is very aspiring in scope, “undertaking to articulate the most essential aspects of a culture, from its origin stories to its idea of social behavior, social structure, and relationship to the natural world and to the supernatural” (18). Moreover, the definition of what exactly qualifies a narrative to be epic is essentially emic and determined by historical and cultural contexts. “Community self-identification, caste ambitions, and local religious cult all determine whether a people views the epic as its own defining narrative” (17).

When dealing with Hittite or Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) material, Martin’s relational, dynamic approach to epic may help to avoid the pitfalls of tautology and circular reasoning. This occurs when Hittite or ANE narratives are identified as epics on account of formal, generic definitions of the term that were not originally developed on the basis of the Hittite or the ANE material (Sasson 2005: 225). As Piotr Michalowski notes (1992: 228; this vol.), applications of modern generic definitions of the term epic to ANE texts “subconsciously bring to bear upon these texts very specific anachronistic expectations and interpretative strategies.”

Martin’s normative approach also illustrates a paradox underlying the study of “Hittite epic.” Various texts found in the libraries and archives of Hattuša, the Hittite capital – most notably the elaborate mythological cycle of poems concerning the competition between Kumarbi and Teššub over heavenly kingship, and the “Song of Release” – are often studied as exponents of an “Eastern Mediterranean epic tradition” in the context of possible ANE influences on Greek cultural production (West 1997: 101–6; Bachvarova 2005: 131–53; see also Bachvarova, this volume). Other narratives are regarded as manifestations of an Indo-European epic lore (Watkins 1995; Katz 2005). Comparative studies of these compositions have indeed shown that they share

common forms, themes, motifs, or phraseology with other epic traditions. From a hittitological perspective, however, precisely these compositions are usually considered to be foreign, translated literature (Beckman 2005: 255; Klinger 2007: 73), mostly confined to erudite circles. Were these compositions ever considered “epic” by a Hittite audience as well? Were they ever performed at all in Hattuša or did they merely circulate in the libraries of scholars and scribes?

One way to approach the question of what the Hittites themselves considered being of “epic” (greater than life) dimension – embodying their history, identity and aspirations – is to search for a Hittite hero. “The return of Odysseus,” writes Irad Malkin in the introduction of his book on this topic (1998: 1), “must have been on the minds of historical Greeks when they were sailing beyond Ithaca.” In Mesopotamia, large parts of the populace must have been acquainted with the figure of Gilgameš and venerated him as king in the Netherworld (Sallaberger 2008: 59, 119). What heroes did the Hittites have in their heads?

A look at the dictionaries under *haštali* shows that both gods and men could be denoted either with an adjective: “sturdy, stout, brave, heroic,” or with a noun: “warrior, champion, hero” (Puhvel 1991: 235–6; Friedrich et al. 2004: 430–1). In Hittite literature, the epithet was mostly reserved to denote the Storm-God in his different aspects or other male heads of pantheons as well as characters in “heroic” literature in translation such as Gilgameš and Enkidu or the warriors in the Sargon and Naram-Sin narratives. In the Middle Hittite period (fifteenth century BCE) the Hittite kings began to attribute to themselves the epithet “warrior, hero” (summerogram UR.SAG, Hittite *haštali* or *tarhuili*), an epithet that henceforth was an integral part of their titles. As we shall see, however, although characterized as “heroes,” the Hittite kings do not seem to have sponsored “heroic” poetry about themselves or their ancestors. In fact, the search for a genuine Hittite “hero,” who was celebrated and immortalized in song and poetry, will become almost “epic” in itself.

We encounter our first hero at the dawn of Hittite history. In the concluding paragraphs of the composition known as the *Manly Deeds* (Hittite *pešnatar*; often called *Annals* in modern scholarship) of Hattušili I, a Hittite King who ruled towards the end of the seventeenth century BCE, the king boasts of the following achievements (trans. Beckman 2006 with bibliography):

No one had crossed the Euphrates River, but I, the Great King, the Tabarna, crossed it on foot, and my army crossed it on foot behind me. Sargon (also) crossed it. [He] fought the troops of Hahha, but [he] did not do anything to Hahha. He did not burn it down; smoke was not visible to the storm-god of Heaven.

But I, the Great King, the Tabarna, destroyed Haššu(wa) and Hahha and [burned] them down with fire. I [showed] smoke to the sun-god of Heaven and the storm-god. I hitched the king of Haššu(wa) and the king of Hahha to a wagon.

These two paragraphs summarize the destruction of Hahhum and Haššu(wa), both major Syrian cities, described in detail earlier in the composition. Both conquests,

which took place in the final year covered in the *Manly Deeds*, form the peak of Hattušili's achievements as described in this composition. For our purposes, it is especially Hattušili's flattering comparison with the Akkadian king Sargon – a king who lived more than half a millennium earlier – which deserves special attention.

It is reasonable to assume that the author of the *Manly Deeds* learned about Sargon through the rich "Stream of tradition" concerning the Akkadian kings (Güterbock 1983: 27). The city of Hahhum is featured in other compositions concerning these kings (van de Mieroop 2000: 153). More importantly, Hattušili did not only compare himself to Sargon, he apparently engaged in direct dialogue with him, responding to the famous challenge taken from one of the Old Babylonian compositions about this ruler (J. Westenholz 1997: 77): "Lo, the king who wants to equal me, where I have gone, let him also go!"

As already suggested by several scholars, the traditions concerning the Akkadian kings may have inspired their Old Hittite colleagues to conduct daring military campaigns of their own (Haas 1993). This enterprise was crowned by Hattušili's successor, Muṣṣili I, with the conquest of Aleppo, the royal capital of the kingdom of Yamhad. Moreover, the conquest of Aleppo was promptly followed by an amazing military expedition down the Euphrates River to Babylon, situated some 800 kilometers away from Aleppo. This expedition brought about the fall of Babylon and the demise of the dynasty of Hammurabi. The Old Hittite kings, so it seems, may have had Sargon in their heads.

Several compositions concerning the Akkadian kings were indeed found, in Hittite translation or adaptation, in the archives and libraries of Hattuša, even if of a later date (for an overview see Beckman 2001). One composition in Hittite translation concerns Naram-Sin's victory over a coalition of rebellious kings (*KBo* 3.13, edited by Güterbock 1938: 66–80). The composition, the so called *Great Revolt against Naram-Sin*, is known in different versions (J. Westenholz 1997: 221–61, text 17). Several of these are Old Babylonian recensions which have been shown to be adaptations of an original Old Akkadian inscription (Michalowski 1980: 233–46). All these versions contain a detailed catalogue of enemy kings but in each this list of adversaries differs somewhat and seems to be representing a different geographical horizon (Jonker 1995: 122–32). The Hittite text is unfortunately quite fragmentary, but its best preserved part (obv. 8'–15') contains a detailed list of 17 kings, who rose against Naram-Sin, only to be defeated by him. A parallel catalogue of these kings is found in one of the Old Babylonian manuscripts, probably originating from Sippar (edited by J. Westenholz 1997: 246–57 as *Gula-An and the Seventeen Kings against Naram-Sin*). A close comparison of the two lists reveals that the Hittite version features more Anatolian rulers than its parallel from Sippar (van de Mieroop 2000: 138–40). An otherwise unknown king of Hattuša, Pamba, is featured exclusively in the Hittite version and is missing from the Old Babylonian parallel. Another exclusive feature of the Hittite list is the appearance of the name ^mNu-u[r-], which should very likely be restored as Nūr-Dagan, king of Puruṣhanda, featured in yet another work of literature about the Akkadian kings – likewise freely translated into Hittite – *The King of Battle* (*šar tamhāri*).

The King of Battle narrates Sargon's conquest of the Anatolian city of Puruṣhanda (Güterbock 1969; Gilan 2000; Rieken 2001). The uniqueness and boldness of this venture are a central theme of the composition. Several fragments, representing slightly different versions of the story (in Hittite transformation) were found in Hattuša. Another version of the composition, written in Akkadian and discovered in Tell el-Amarna in Egypt (J. Westenholz 1997: 102–31), is probably based on a Syro-Hittite source (Izre'el 1997: 71; Beckman 2001: 88).

The content of the lesser known Hittite version can be summarized as follows: The text begins with a set of epithets followed by a lengthy dialogue between Sargon and his reluctant warriors concerning a campaign suggested by the merchants. The subject of this dialogue is the distance and the difficulties of such a campaign (*KBo* 3.9). Sargon is determined to go to war and promises his reluctant warriors victory, based on the advice of the goddess Anzili (*IŠTAR*-li), revealed to him in a dream during incubation (*KBo* 22.6 i 5'–13'). The composition then briefly describes the army's crossing of the Tigris and the sacrifices involved (*KBo* 22.6 i 14'–20'). The scene of action then moves to the city of Puruṣhanda. The God Enlil appears in a dream to the king of Puruṣhanda, Nurdahhi, warns him of Sargon's intentions, and reassures him that he will be safe (*KBo* 22.6 i 21'–29').²

Columns ii and iii of *KBo* 22.6 are fragmentary but the following can tentatively be suggested: ii 1'–10' contains a dialogue between the Puruṣhandan king and his warriors, who reassure themselves that no other king in history was able to reach their land – only to enable Sargon to demonstrate the opposite. The sudden conquest of Puruṣhanda is described starting in i 11'. Column iii is dedicated to a dialogue between Sargon and Nurdahhi, in which the latter is forced to admit defeat and to confess that Sargon has no equal. *KBo* 22.6 iv 1'–7' probably relates the scene of Nurdahhi's surrender to Sargon. A new episode opens as Sargon is set to leave Puruṣhanda after a long stay. The warriors protest that they should not leave empty-handed. They request permission to cut three trees that stand at the gate-house, for different purposes, including an image of Sargon that would be set up at the gate. Sargon fulfills their wishes. It is not known whether the image was actually made because the text breaks off at this point (*KBo* 22.6 iv 8'–30').

Evidently, Hittite consumers of these tales identified themselves with the legendary and victorious Akkadian kings. Interestingly, though, they also seemed to favor versions in which local Anatolian rulers were defeated (see van de Mieroop 2000; Gilan 2008). As already noted by Güterbock (1938: 49–51), the Hittite scribe was clearly interested in placing the famous story of the revolt against Naram-Sin in an Anatolian setting and in involving further Anatolian royalties in it. In other Old Babylonian versions of the Sargon story, the king's campaign aims at different lands in the east.

The compositions concerning the Akkadian kings do share many formal features with epics. They include such typical epic features as “a central figure of heroic, even superhuman caliber, perilous journeys, various misadventures, a strong element of the supernatural, repetition of fairly long passages of narrative or dialogue, elaborate greetings, digressions, epic similes, long speeches, vivid and direct descriptions . . . and in general, a lofty tone . . . frequent use of stock epithets,” all in an atmosphere

that is larger than life (Cuddon 1991: 284–93). The scholarly literature on Ancient Near Eastern epic traditions almost always mentions these texts.³ Joan Goodnick Westenholz, who edited the corpus, prefers to classify them as legends (1997: 16–24, but see her chapter in this volume).

Hattušili I may have followed the example set by the Akkadian kings in yet another matter. Towards the end of the Hittite version of his bilingual *Manly Deeds* (*KBo* 10.2 iii 21–2), the king relates that he dedicated a statue of himself to the Sun-goddess of Arinna. In fact, the text itself was very likely inscribed on that very statue or somewhere near it. Long ago it was suggested that statues erected by Akkadian kings and left in different Mesopotamian urban centers may have served as models for this dedication (Houwink ten Cate 1983: 100–1; for more obvious Syrian parallels see Devecchi 2005: 80). Later Hittite kings may have followed Hattušili's example and added statues of their own. Ritual texts and offering-lists document that statues of deceased members of the royal family were placed in different locations within and outside the Hittite capital, received cultic offerings, and were venerated on various festive occasions.⁴

Yet unlike the Akkadian kings, whose inscribed statues – placed in temples of Mesopotamian cities and meticulously copied by Old Babylonian scribes – may have inspired the massive literary preoccupation with their deeds,⁵ the Hittites did not develop a similar literature about their own legendary kings. Hittite scribes possessed literary models to create heroic literature of their own; they had suitable historical figures to stimulate such literature: their ancient glorious kings did not lack heroic potential. As we have seen, Hittite kings were conducting daring military campaigns to distant lands that were certainly comparable to those of Sargon and Naram-Sin. Yet we have no heroic poems celebrating Muṣili's campaign to Babylon or describing Hattušili's heroic attempt – and tragic failure – to conquer Aleppo (see Neumann 1999: 20).

Another pertinent literary genre that evidently did not find its way into the repertoire of Hittite literary production is represented by a small corpus of compositions known in the literature as “historical epics.” Such compositions, celebrating the deeds and achievements of living, not of past kings, combining elements of royal inscriptions with literary tropes found in ancient “epic” treatments (Noegel 2005: 242; Sasson 2005: 221, both with references), were produced in several neighboring courts. Two “historical epics,” on Adad-Nirari I and Tukulti-Ninurta I, both dating to the thirteenth century BCE, are known from Assyria, celebrating victories over Babylon. An “epic” of king Zimri-Lim of Mari on the central Euphrates, dating to the eighteenth century BCE, might also have provided material for a potential Hittite adaption. However, no such compositions, in translation or praising local kings, have been found yet in Hattuša.

Another place to look for songs, chants, and poems in Hittite Anatolia is the rich ritual literature. Güterbock once estimated that almost 90 percent of the textual material that was excavated in the Hittite capital Hattuša consists of festival and ritual texts. These prescriptive texts were probably compiled by the scribes to assist the king and his retinue in fulfilling their obligations to the gods. Singing and recitation

were a fundamental component of religious ceremonies and were embedded in all kinds of ritual action (see de Martino 2002; Schuol 2004). Unfortunately, the songs and recitations mentioned in the texts are only rarely quoted in full. In most cases, only the title of a song, the deity to which it is addressed, or its opening line are listed. Short mythological narratives were embedded as well in ritual action and were performed during the ceremonies. Occasionally, we also find martial dances, accompanied by drums, performed by soldiers or by the cult personnel, armed with swords or other weapons. Other manuals include descriptions of dramatic performances during festivals, sometimes even by the king himself, and sometimes these allude to possibly historical events (overviews in de Martino 1995; Gilan 2001). The most famous example, which was performed at a provincial autumn festival in honor of the Storm-god (*KUB* 17, 35 iii 9–15; Gilan 2001: 119–20 with previous literature), was a rather cowardly affair:

They divide the young men into two halves and name them: one half of them they call the men of Hattuša, and the other half they call the men of Maša. The men of Hattuša have bronze weapons, whereas the men of Maša have weapons of reed. They wage battle. The men of Hattuša are victorious; they take a captive and consign him to the deity.

Apart from the mythological material, there is to my knowledge no evidence that poetry about the deeds of heroes, or anything else that looks like epic, was performed on these festive occasions. A striking exception to this rule, however, was suggested by Calvert Watkins (1986: 45–62), who focused on the first line of a song featured in a ritual from the Luwian cult city of Iṣtanuwa. The ritual text, dated to the Old Hittite Period, is written in Hittite. The chants, however, were sung in Luwian. One paragraph opens with the following lines (in Watkins’s translation):

Afterwards he drinks (to the deity) Šuwašuna [and they sing:]
“When they came from steep Wiluša.”

(Luwian: *ahha-ta-ta alati awienta wilušati*)

Watkins renders *alati wilušati* as “steep Wiluša” – the famous epithet for Ilium in the *Iliad*. Further, he suggests that this line is the beginning of a Luwian epic lay, an Anatolian predecessor of the *Iliad* – a “Wilušiad.” This supposed *Wilušiad* would date back to the Old Hittite period, a time in which, according to a later Hittite historical tradition, the Old Hittite king Labarna was indeed campaigning in Western Anatolia. However, Frank Starke argues that *alati* does not mean “steep,” for which there is no evidence, but “waters, sea”; he translates the passage: “When they came from the sea, from Wiluša” (1997: 473 n. 78). Günter Neumann (1999: 20–1 n. 20) goes even further. He questions the reading of *wilušati* as the name of a city, interpreting it instead as an extended form of the Hittite word *wellu-* “meadow, pasture,” and considers, not without irony, the first line of the song (“when they came from the meadow-lands”) merely the beginning of a shepherd-song, sung in autumn on occasion of the return of the herdsmen to their villages. I will not decide here whether

the song is indeed a Hittite *Wilušiad* or merely a simple shepherd-song. A Hittite *Wilušiad* would, however, appear to be a strikingly unique piece.

The Hittites' lack of interest in producing their own heroic poetry about local figures is only matched by their erudite enthusiasm for imported heroes in "translation." This disinterest in indigenous literary heroes becomes even more evident in the beginnings of the new Hittite kingdom (the so-called Middle Hittite Period). The reign of Tudhaliya I marks a new phase in Hittite history and culture. In this period the Hittites absorbed new literary and religious traditions in the Hurrian language, originating in the south – in Syria and especially Kizzuwatna.⁶ Among these Hurrian traditions we also encounter some new types of literary heroes.

In this period, the Hittites came to know Gilgameš; various versions of the composition in Hittite, Hurrian and Akkadian were found in the archives of the Hittite capital.⁷ A comparison of different versions seems to indicate that the Hittite version of Gilgameš was probably translated from the Hurrian. Most notably, the Hittite version shares many parallels with songs of the Kumarbi Cycle. Like them, it is identified in its colophon as a "song" (SÌR; see now Archi 2007b: 187–8). The elaborate Hurrian-Hittite cycle of mythological poems concerning the competition between Kumarbi and Teššub over heavenly kingship is certainly the closest the Hittites ever came to a full-blown epic. Kumarbi, who was deposed by Teššub, attempts to regain heavenly kingship by challenging Teššub with the help of different adversaries. The various songs of the cycle are each dedicated to an adversary: the tutelary deity Silver, the monstrous sea-snake Hedammu, the giant stone monster Ullikummi as well as finally the sea-god himself, whom Teššub and his associates are able to outwit and overcome at the last minute.⁸ The songs of the Kumarbi Cycle as well as other mythological narratives tell of deities who dupe and combat monsters – deeds performed later by human heroes. Human protagonists, however, play only a minor role in them.

Returning to human heroes, we find yet another featured in a translated composition: Gurparanzah, king of the fictitious land of Ailanuwa. The name is an emblematic composite consisting of Hurrian *gurp* (*gurpisi*, a "weapon") and Aranzah (the Hurrian name of the Tigris River). From the few surviving fragments (edited now by Pecchioli Daddi 2003) we learn that Gurparanzah takes part in a hunt organized by Impakru, the likewise fictional king of Akkad, in which he displays his courage by killing various wild animals. Afterwards he is chosen by Impakru to become his son-in-law and invited to Akkad, where he proves his skills by beating 60 kings and 70 warriors in an archery contest. He is taken in a nuptial procession to his bride Tatizuli (*tad* in Hurrian means "loving"), but she refuses to consummate the marriage until she receives an appropriate dowry. Gurparanzah cries desperately for help which he promptly receives from his protector, the river Tigris, who flies like an eagle to seek help from the fates and mother goddesses. According to the editor, the composition may be a late literary elaboration of a Hurrian etiological or foundation myth, until then transmitted orally, that referred to the beginning of an ancient local dynasty (Pecchioli Daddi 2003: 492). Yet, apart from the atmospheric setting of the tale in Akkad and the fact that a River Tigris existed then as it does today, there is nothing historical whatsoever in the parts of the composition available to us.

Through Hurrian mediation the Hittites became reacquainted with the Akkadian kings. The composition *King of Battle* was possibly transmitted by Hurrian mediators (Archi 2000). *KUB 27.38*, a middle Hittite ritual-text that embeds lists of historical kings in ritual settings, should also be mentioned in the context of Hurrian cultural borrowings. The first part (obverse i) contains a Hurrian song, which is prescribed to be sung during the production of king-substituting wool-puppets (*šarrāna*). Various deified rulers are summoned, among whom is Atal-šen, a known ruler of Urkiš and Nawar. Later on mountains and rivers are mentioned, among them the mountains Hazzi (Jabal al-Aqra, ancient Cassius) and Nanni, satellites of the god Teššub. The subject of the second part (obverse ii 1'–reverse iii 12) is another song concerning the circle of deities around Hapat and Teššub, and especially their offspring Šarruma. The third part (reverse iii 13–iv 33, afterwards broken) contains a list of diverse ANE royalties. Among these rulers we find the Old Akkadian kings Sargon, Maništušu, Naram-Sin, the latter written, in accordance with tradition, with a god-determinative, and Šar-kalli-šarri. Also listed are Šinammaturi, Autalumma, king of Elam, the Hurrian king Ušhune, Kiklib-adalli from Tukriš, Immašku from Lullue and two unnamed kings, of Hatti and of the Illaya lands (for these kings see Van de Mieroop 2000: 141), followed by none other than Kumarbi and Hedammu (written *ḫi-i-dam*), the sea-monster created by Kumarbi and Šetrapšuruhi to fight Teššub.⁹ The presence in the list of both deity and mythological sea-monster offers yet another proof of how freely the ancient scribes treated “historical” king-lists. As already observed by several commentators on the text (de Martino 1993: 132–4 and n. 31 with previous references), the “author” of the ritual mixed various materials – including personal and geographical names belonging to traditions about the Akkadian kings – and integrated them into a new religious context. The kings in the list are characterized as “wise” and summoned in the form of the wool-puppets mentioned in the obverse to act as judges in the ritual (Haas 1993: 137–8).

Narratives about the hunter Kešše are known from some Hittite (trans. Hoffner 1998a: 87–9; see now Haas 2006: 206–11) and Hurrian (Salvini 1988) fragments from Hattuša as well as a tiny fragment in Akkadian, found – like the *King of Battle* concerning Sargon – in el-Amarna, Egypt (Izre'el 1997: 17–19). The very lengthy composition – the Hurrian version consisted of at least 15 tablets – of which some 10 percent are (badly) preserved – concerns the obsession of the hunter Kešše with his beautiful but evil wife Šindalimeni, which causes Kešše to neglect his mother, his occupation, and the gods. Finally, persuaded by his mother, Kešše goes hunting again but the gods withhold game from him. A long break is followed by a series of seven ill-omened dreams. The Hurrian version, designated also by the word-sign ŠĪR (“poem, song”) features a debate in the council of elders, with participation of several gods, about Kešše's refusal to hunt.

Another, better preserved depiction of an assembly scene is found in the Hurrian-Hittite *Song of Release* (ŠĪR *parā tarnumar*) that shares some formulaic sequences with the song of Kešše (Neu 1993: 111–20). The composition has come down to us in the form of a Hurrian-Hittite bilingual text: the Hurrian version on the left-hand column, the corresponding Hittite translation to the right. It comprised at least six

tablets in various series and is dated to the Middle Hittite Period.¹⁰ It includes narratives recounting a banquet scene in the palace of Allani, the goddess of the netherworld, and an assembly scene in Ebla as well as a collection of seven parables of wisdom. Its designation by the Hittite scribes as *SÌR* (Hittite *išhamiya-*, “song, poem”) is generally rendered as “epic” in scholarly discussions of the text.¹¹

As the proem of the composition discloses, it concerns the destruction of the Syrian city of Ebla (Tell Mardih, southeast of Aleppo). The reason for this event seems to be the refusal of the assembly of Ebla to release the captives from the neighboring city of Ikinkali who were held in Ebla as prisoners of war. The person demanding the release of the captives is the Storm-god himself, Teššub of Kumme. In case of refusal, Teššub threatens to destroy the city. Mēgi, the ruler of Ebla (and Mēgi was indeed a title held by the Eblaite kings) is willing to free the captives but the assembly, led by the brilliant and influential speaker Zazalla, refuses to release them. The description of the actual destruction of Ebla which must have followed does not survive. The city of Ebla was destroyed in the seventeenth century BCE – roughly during the time the Old Hittite kings Hattušili I and Muršili I were conducting their military expeditions in Syria. Hattušili I even reports in his *Manly Deeds* that he took the city of Ikinkali and released the male and female subjects of the city of Hahhum from their corvée duties in favor of service to the Sun-goddess of Arinna.¹² According to the *Song of Release*, however, Ebla was destroyed by a certain Pizikarra of Nineveh, following the orders of Teššub (Archi 2007b: 189).

The *Song of Release* is the most “historical” of the songs from the Hurrian-Hittite tradition. The composition seems to reflect some elements of historical reality. At the very least it contains several “realisms” such as the names of cities involved, the proper name Mēgi (“king”) which in Ebla was used as the title of the local ruler, and the description of an upper and lower city of Ebla, which fits perfectly with the Middle Bronze Age architecture in Tell Mardih. The composition itself, especially in the Hurrian version, is a literary work of art, employing a variety of poetic devices (see most recently Haas 2006: 177–92; Archi 2007b: 190). It was probably written down in Hurrian and then translated into Hittite, very likely by a writer whose native language was Hurrian.¹³

But was the *Song of Release* – which dealt with the destruction of the Syrian city of Ebla and the release of war captives from the neighboring city of Ikinkali and thus had nothing whatsoever to do with things Hittite – ever considered “epic” by a Hittite audience? Did it embody their own notions of history, identity, and deepest aspirations? It very probably did not (*pace* Bachvarova 2005, and this volume). On the other hand, the main protagonist of the composition, like that of the Kumarbi Cycle, is the Hurrian head of the pantheon, the Storm-god Teššub of Kumme (for this deity see Schwemer 2001; 2007).¹⁴ Teššub and his spouse Hebat are depicted as the supreme couple of the Hittite pantheon in the empire period relief in Yazilikaya, the central shrine of the Hittite capital. Their son Šarruma also plays a paramount role in the Hittite pantheon of that period. Members of the Hittite royal family of that time could bear Hurrian names (Beal 2002) and worship deities with Hurrian names in the rock sanctuary of Yazilikaya (Singer 1995). It is therefore

conceivable that the songs of the Kumarbi Cycle that account for the supremacy of Teššub were of special importance to members of the Hittite court, far beyond the scribal academy. According to prevailing scholarly opinion, unlike the shorter local Anatolian mythical narratives, the compositions of the Kumarbi Cycle were not integrated in ritual action and therefore “most likely had no function in Hittite society beyond their use as the substance of exercises in the scribal academy” (Beckman 2005: 260). However, the Hittite versions of some of the songs of the Cycle were written in meter (Melchert 2007), and at least the *Song of the Sea* was indeed embedded in a ritual context (Haas 2006: 151). Hence these songs were perhaps more meaningful specifically to a Hittite audience than we have thought so far, and should not be considered merely scholarly foreign literature in translation (see now Corti 2007).

To conclude, whereas evidence for poetry concerning the deeds and tribulations of deities, most notably the Hurrian Storm-god Teššub, abounds, the search for poetry about local heroes, most notably contemporary or past kings, has turned out to be futile. Whatever the reasons may be, the terms “heroic” and “poetry” that fit so well together in many other historical constellations, seem to be separate entities in the Hittite world. Indeed, our survey of the material suggests that the ancient authors and their audiences found no delight whatsoever in juicy, bloody depictions of “heroic” military actions and battle scenes. This is true for narratives such as the *King of Battle*, in which the actual conquest of the city of Purušhanda is only noted in passing, whereas most of the composition is dedicated to long dialogues before and after it. Interestingly, Hittite historiography too, one of the most prolific and rich branches of Hittite literary production, which deals exclusively with military conflicts and the way the Hittite kings handled them, lacks descriptions of battle scenes. It focuses mostly on presenting the reasons for military conflicts and the political aftermath of military operations. Depictions of the military actions themselves are rare and scanty.¹⁵

It is not surprising, therefore, that the only Hittite literary work describing in detail an ongoing siege, or any battle for that matter, is not an awe-inspiring epic but slapstick comedy on the art of siege. The so-called *Siege of Uršu*, an Old Hittite composition written in Akkadian with Hittite glosses (Beckman 1995), describes events occurring during a Hittite siege of the city of Uršu in northern Syria, not far from Ebla, probably during the reign of Hattušili I. The king, stationed away from the battlefield, keeps receiving bad news from the officers in charge of the siege. The text consists almost entirely of dialogues between the servants bringing the news and the king who reacts furiously and gives new instructions. Thus, when the battering-ram is broken, the king orders them to construct a new one; the approach of winter complicates work on the ramp; the person instructed to produce a new siege tower and battering-ram refuses to deliver or sends them elsewhere. The king’s officers act cowardly and hesitate, and the siege is a fiasco:

While they did nothing to the city, many servants of the king were hit, and many died. The king became angry and said: “Guard the roads – keep watch on those who would enter the city and those who would go out of the city! Let no one go over to the enemies – to the city of Zaruar, to the city of Aleppo, to the Hurrian army, or to Zuppa!” They

replied: “We will be on guard. Eighty chariots and eight armies encircle the city. May the heart of the king not be troubled. I am in place!” Then a fugitive came out of the city and said: “The servant of the man of Aleppo is present in the city; the men of Zaruar go in and out; the servant of ‘the Son of the Storm-god’ [the Hurrian king], my lord, goes back and forth . . .” (*KBo* 1.11, reverse 22–32, trans. Beckman 1995: 23–34).

Perhaps it was the way war was conceived and carried out that just did not lend itself easily to the creation of heroic poetry. Heroic communities are often characterized by their readiness to make sacrifices – even commit self-sacrifice – in defense of the community (Münkler 2006: 310–37). The wars conducted by the Hittite kings or by their Ancient Near Eastern colleagues were usually not fought in defense of the community but for spoils, political control, and power. Hence readiness to make painful sacrifices was rarely in demand. The following advice, given in a letter by the aged Hittite King Hattušili III to his young colleague, Kadašman-Enlil of Babylon, demonstrates this point very well:

[Furthermore, my brother]: I have heard that my brother has become a grown man and regularly goes out to hunt. [I rejoice] greatly that the Storm-God has exalted the name of my brother Kadašman-Turgu. [. . .] go and plunder an enemy land in this manner so that I might hear about it. [. . .] my [brother] defeated. Furthermore, my brother: They have said [that my brother is] a king whose weapons have been stowed and who just sits around. Do they say this about him? [. . .] Do not keep sitting around, my brother, but go against an enemy land and defeat the enemy! [Against which land] should [my brother] go out? Go against a land over which you enjoy three- or fourfold numerical superiority. (*KBo* 1.10 + *KUB* 3.72; trans. Beckman 1999: 138–43).

Hattušili was advising the Babylonian king to earn fame for himself and follow in the steps of his father. His recommendation of how to earn such fame, however, is hardly the fabric heroic poetry is made of.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Kurt Raaflaub and David Konstan for their kind invitation to the conference and for their work on the manuscript. I am also indebted to Fritz Graf and Julia Nelson-Hawkins for their kind invitation to Ohio State and to Joan Goodnick Westenholz for sending me her unpublished paper on “The Heroes of Sumer and Akkad.” Hittite texts are published in mainly two series; *KBo* refers to *Keilschrifttexte aus Boğazköi*, *KUB* is an abbreviation of *Keilschrifturkunden aus Boğazköi*. A *CTH* number designates the classification of a Hittite text in Laroche’s *Catalogue des textes hittites* (1971). Further literature for the study of Hittite texts can conveniently be found in Silvin Košak’s electronic database, *Konkordanz der hethitischen Texte*, accessible through www.hethiter.net, where other useful databases are located as well.
- 2 Nurdahhi seems to be a mistaken rendering of the name of the Purušhandan king who was probably originally called Nūr-Dagan “the light of Dagan” (see Güterbock 1969: 18; J. Westenholz 1997: 57–8; van de Mieroop 2000: 138). Archi (2000: 67) suggests,

- on the other hand, that the name of Sargon's rival was originally indeed Nurdahhi (Nawar-Tahe), a well-attested Hurrian name that was attached to Sargon's adversary through the Hurrian mediators of the story. However, the name is spelled correctly in another Hittite fragment *KBo* 13.46, 8^m *Nu-ur-da-ga*[-], which shows that the mistake made by the scribe of *KBo* 22.6 was not shared by his colleagues. Archi's suggestion fails therefore to convince. The city of Purušhanda is likewise featured in other traditions about the Akkadian Kings (J. Westenholz 1997: 342).
- 3 Sasson 2005: 221; Noegel 2005: 242; Beckman 2005: 257, to list but a few examples.
 - 4 See Archi 2007a; Singer, in press; Torri 2008, for an overview of the pertinent material.
 - 5 Liverani 1993: 48–51; see, however, J. Westenholz 1983: 331, who sees in the legends about the Akkadian kings essentially popular, oral creations. According to A. Westenholz 1992: 46, this popular memory may even have stimulated the scribes to study the inscriptions in the first place. Van De Mieroop (1999: 59–76) traces the developments of the traditions concerning Sargon throughout the centuries. For the traditions concerning Naram-Sin see Glassner 1986.
 - 6 For various aspects of this Syrian/Hurrian cultural influence in Hattuša, see Klinger 2001; Miller 2004; Archi 2003, 2007b, and the survey by Hoffner 1998b.
 - 7 Beckman 2003: 35–57; 2005: 258–60; Klinger 2005: 103–27; Archi 2007b: 186–8, all with previous literature.
 - 8 For English translations of the poems see Hoffner 1998a; see also the overviews by Beckman 2005: 260–1; Haas 2006: 130–76; Archi 2007b: 197–201, all with ample references.
 - 9 For a recent translation of the Hedammu song, see Hoffner 1998a: 50–5; for the identification, Wilhelm 2003 with previous bibliography.
 - 10 Ed. Neu 1996; trans. Hoffner 1998a: 67–77; Wilhelm 2001: 82–91 with improved sequence of the fragments. See now also Haas 2006: 177–92; Bachvarova, this volume.
 - 11 Watkins 1995: 247–8; Neu 1996: 7; Hoffner 1998a: 66–7; Bachvarova 2002: 120–8; see, however, Wilhelm 1997: 277–8 n. 1.
 - 12 For the thematic similarities between the *Manly Deeds* of Hattušili and the *Song of Release* see Bachvarova, in press, and her chapter in this volume.
 - 13 Wilhelm 1997: 283–4; see now Archi 2007b: 188–90 on the transmission of the *Song*, with previous literature.
 - 14 Kumme is located in the Eastern Habur region.
 - 15 The best study of Hittite historiography remains Cancik 1976.

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Manly Deeds: Hittite Admonitory History and Eastern Mediterranean Didactic Epic

MARY R. BACHVAROVA

Oh Perses, you put these things into your mind and listen now to justice and forget force altogether. For the son of Kronos has set different laws for humans than for fish and wild beasts and winged birds; those eat each other, since there is no justice among them; but to humans he gave justice.

(Hesiod, *Works and Days* 274–8)

In this chapter I study Old Hittite historiographic texts and the *Song of Release*, a Hurro-Hittite epic, discovered in 1983, about the destruction of the North Syrian city of Ebla. My hope is to understand better the techniques used to turn historical events into epic in the Eastern Mediterranean area during the second and first millennia BCE.¹ At the height of their Late Bronze Age empire, the Hittites, who spoke an Indo-European language in the same sub-group as Lydian, Lycian, and Carian, ruled most of Anatolia and North Syria, interacting with Greek-speakers, Western Anatolians, Western Semites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and Hurrians, a people who spoke a language so far only connected to Urartian. In the archives at the Hittite capital Hattusa (modern Boğazköy/Boğazkale) are preserved an abundance of annals, diplomatic letters, and treaties, along with religious, literary, and mythological texts, the most famous of which is the *Song of Kumarbi*, frequently compared to Hesiod's *Theogony* (Lesky 1950, 1955; West 1997: 276–80). The *Song of Release* takes part in the same tradition of Hurro-Hittite song embodied in the *Song of Kumarbi* and the *Song of Gilgamesh*, attested in both Hurrian and Hittite at Hattusa, and like them it has Mesopotamian and/or North Syrian origins and Greek descendants.²

While the friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu parallels the intimate relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, the *Song of Release* shares a separate set of correspondences with the *Iliad*, for a central scene is a debate by two humans before an assembly of humans over whether the freeing of captives is desired by a god, followed by the god's intervention, destroying the offenders. This is the same plot line that opens the *Iliad*, an encapsulation of the epic's larger plot concerning the release of Helen (Bachvarova 2005b). The Eblaite assembly, swayed by the arguments of Zazalla, “who speaks greatly in the city, [whose] words no one turns aside” (*KBo* 32.16 ii 6–8), prevents Meki, the king of Ebla, from showing mercy to

the captive people of Ikinkalis who are forced to labor for the elite of Ebla instead of serving the royal ancestor cult, a decision that provokes the destruction of Ebla at the hands of the Hurrian Storm-god Teshshub (Bachvarova 2005a).

Furthermore, both the *Song of Release* and the story of Hector in the *Iliad* have close ties with the Mesopotamian legends of the Akkadian conquerors Sargon the Great (2340–2284) and his grandson Naram-Sin (2260–2223), whose exploits inspired the Anatolian kings as they carved out their position in history (van de Mieroop 2000; Beckman 2001). While the *Song of Release* places the blame for the downfall of his city on Zazalla, because he fails to accept the messages communicated by the Storm-god Teshshub through the king, the *Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin* (attested at Hattusa in both Akkadian and Hittite)³ analyzes Naram-Sin's role in the supposed destruction of Akkade, seeing him as a well-meaning but flawed ruler. The *Iliad* takes a stand similar to that of the *Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin*, for Hector, like Naram-Sin, misinterprets the omens sent him by the gods, refusing to withdraw his army inside the walls of his city (*Iliad* Book 8, Bachvarova 2008). Because of the obvious “areal” connections between the Greek hexametric tradition and several different narratives found at Hattusa, a comparison with the *Song of Release* does more than elucidate the Greek epic tradition through ethnographic comparanda; rather, it offers important insights into the prehistory of Homeric and Hesiodic poetry.

The narrative of the *Song of Release*, written in parallel columns with the Hurrian version to the left and the Hittite translation to the right, somehow combines a series of animal parables with the epic story line concerning the destruction of Ebla.⁴ No direct connection can be made between the two, although the “parables” and the “epic” use the same specialized poetic language, present the text in the same rare bilingual format, and were placed together in the same jar.⁵ As it is clear that there is more than one recension of the epic,⁶ and more than one scribe worked on the tablets (Neu 1996: 5), we should not see the tablets as establishing a final canonical written text, but as representing multiple textualizations of an oral tradition. I explore the relationship of these two story lines by discussing the role of animal metaphors, similes, and parables in both epic and ancient historiography, in which men were compared to and contrasted with animals. I first review the relevant Hittite texts, showing how annalistic history, historical legend, admonitory case studies, and epic drew on the same animal imagery, frequently introducing the images by means of direct speech that allowed complementary genres to be included in the main narrative and oral performances to be recorded or imitated in writing. Then I bring in evidence from frescoes at Thera and Pylos indicating that some of the themes and techniques found in Hittite historiography and epic were used by Minoans and Mycenaeans to turn history into legend. I discuss the role of imbedded narratives in Greek epic, and finally I argue that the mix of history, animal fable, legend, and didactic sayings in Hesiod's *Works and Days* fits well with the patterns found in Hittite historical epic, and thus that *Works and Days* faithfully represents a particular type of Eastern Mediterranean historical epic.

Turning now to the relationship of the *Song of Release* to historical events, the story can be linked to either of two destructions of Ebla.⁷ The names Zazalla and Meki,

otherwise unattested in the Hittite corpus, are found in the third millennium Ebla archive (Astour 2002: 133–49), a coincidence that could be argued to result from the use of traditional names, or a garbled reminiscence of personages famous in the Eblaite tradition.⁸ Thus, it is possible that the *Song of Release* draws on an ancient epic tradition, preserved in this archive, about the destruction of Ebla for which both Sargon the Great and his grandson Naram-Sin claimed responsibility.⁹ Their claims may have inspired the Hittite kings to new heights of “manly deeds,” for the city of Ebla was destroyed again around 1600 by an Old Hittite king, either Hattusili I or his son Mursili I. While the only preserved mention of Ebla is in some frustratingly small fragments of Old Hittite historiographic texts,¹⁰ the conflict described in the *Song of Release* involves captives from the town of Ikinkalis, a town mentioned not only in the Ebla archives (as Agagalis), but also in the *Annals* of the Old Hittite king Hattusili I.¹¹

Based on paleographic considerations, most scholars think that the *Song of Release* was brought to Hattusa from North Syria in the Middle Hittite period (1450–1380, Neu 1996: 3–7), although the editor of the text himself was open to the possibility that the Hurrian version of the text arrived at Hattusa in the Old Hittite period (ibid.: 483).¹² In fact, the version of the *Song of Release* we have is not an Old Syrian tale imported wholesale to Hattusa, but takes into account Hittite interests. I have shown, for example, that the title and topic of the *Song of Release* allude specifically to the Hittite custom of freeing subjects from corvée labor and other governmentally imposed work obligations in order to be better able to serve the cults of the gods and royal ancestors (Bachvarova 2005a). Furthermore, when we compare the *Song of Release* with Old Hittite historical and admonitory texts, we can see that it reflects the literary techniques, purpose, and motifs of Old Hittite literary texts, suggesting that its composer was intimately familiar with the literary traditions of the Hittites first found in the Old Hittite court.

The documents that address events happening in Old Hittite campaigns into North Syria against the Hurrians present an intriguing mix of historiographic and mythopoietic techniques which shed light on how the Hittites undertook to turn history into propagandistic legend, inspired by the long-established empires and propaganda machines of Sargonic kings. Hattusili I, the first great Hittite king, pushed the borders of his empire far to the east and south beyond Anatolia and established the Hittites as an international presence, bringing the Hittites into military conflict with the Hurrians, who had settled in northern Mesopotamia and northern Syria in the course of the previous 800 years, possibly coming down from the Caucasus mountains.¹³ Chief among Hattusili’s means of continuing his legacy were documents of admonitory history chronicling his activities and recording his “wisdom” (*hattatar*), in which he painted a portrait of himself as a just “king who detects and punishes the failures” of his family and servants (Hoffner 1980: 300–3; see also Beckman 1995: 32–3) and liberates his subjects from oppression (Hoffner 1980: 298). Characters often appear in more than one of the historical/admonitory texts, and so do certain cities, including ones that were part of the Old Assyrian trade network in Anatolia, such as Purushhanda, Urshu, Hahhu, and Hassu, and other historically important cities, such as Ebla, Alalakh, and Aleppo, and we get a sense of a coherent program

of propaganda creating “world history” that tied recent events to the distant past. The fact that nearly all the texts discussed here are New Script copies (c. 1200) of Old Hittite originals shows the continued interest among the Hittite elite in the early deeds of Hattusili I and his grandson Mursili I.¹⁴

Hattusili’s *Annals* are our primary extant source for the history of his reign, and the basis by which we can place the mythopoietic versions of events. Billed in the colophon as the “manliness(es),” or manly deeds, of Hattusili, they selectively describe six years of his military successes in southeast Anatolia, northern Syria, and Mesopotamia.¹⁵ Most of the *Annals* is simply told, recounting that in succeeding years of his reign, the king attacked such and such a city, conquered it, and transported its goods and people home, usually to be dedicated at the temple of the Sun-goddess of Arinna, but the historical significance of conquering cities that belonged to earlier empires is articulated by the repeated use of motifs and turns of phrase that appear in Sargonic inscriptions and literary narratives (Steiner 1999: 430–6). The cities subdued in the first campaign include Zalpa(r), Alalakh, Urshu, and Ikakala (§§2–4), and the final campaign preserved for us is focused on Hassu and Hahhu, to which the longest and most finely wrought section is devoted. Hattusili crushed Hassu under his feet as a lion would, even though it was aided by the troops of Aleppo (§10). Along with two silver bulls and 13 statues of gods from the defeated city, a deity (the underworld goddess Allani/Allatu who plays a major role in the *Song of Release*) was transported to Hattusa, as was the Storm-god of Aleppo, perhaps already syncretized with the Hurrian god Teshshub (§11) and later becoming the city god of Hattusa (Schwemer 2001: 443–6, 489–502).

Moving on to Hahhu, Hattusili glared at (?) the city like a lion (§15), attacked it three times, and overcame it. The king showed his piety and mercy by freeing the slaves of Hahhu and the city’s citizens from their obligations of corvée labor to serve the Sun-goddess of Arinna (§17), Hattusili’s patron deity who, he claims, took him by the hand and ran before his army (§5). This text in fact was intended to be transcribed onto a gold statue of Hattusili dedicated to the Sun-goddess (§17). The Hittite king compares himself to Sargon the Great, boasting that although Sargon had crossed the Euphrates before Hattusili, even he was unable to penetrate Hahhu, and he finishes the episode by describing the burning of the two sacked cities, the lavish booty obtained from their temples, and the humiliation of their leaders, who were yoked together and driven like plough oxen (§19) – the animal imagery was actually enacted.

Hattusili’s *Annals* frame themselves as a written document and are inspired by a Middle Assyrian tradition of writing down for display the exploits of the king to legitimate his rule (Klinger 2001a). Yet peculiar to this early period alone, in which the Hittites were experimenting with writing down history in a variety of formats (de Martino 2002: 79), are Old Hittite narratives that record in a more vivid style suggestive of orally told stories the same *res gestae* extolled in the *Annals*.¹⁶ These develop in various ways animal or animalistic imagery that gives context to Herodotus’s fascination with exotic peoples and faraway places and Thucydides’ exploration of human nature.¹⁷ Furthermore, these mythopoietic texts were composed within a hundred years, most likely within a generation, of the events themselves and were

copied side by side with the *Annals* for some 400 years, showing that we cannot think in terms of legend *replacing* historiography as events fade into folk memory. Rather, we see legend rapidly and consciously manufactured and applied to justify real-life events, and to magnify their historical importance.

The *Siege of Urshu* tells from another angle the events narrated in §4 of Hattusili's *Annals*.¹⁸ It focuses on the king's reactions to his incompetent generals, with extensive quotes including animal imagery, while a fragmentary text about the destruction of Hassu tells how Zukrashi, the enemy general (a real person who also appears in the archives of Alalakh VII), met his end.¹⁹ Each text provides a window into the use of animal imagery, which is often humiliating and dehumanizing, in authoritative speech by the king,²⁰ who sarcastically remarks that "a dog will run" before his generals' army when they go into battle (*CTH* 7 i 8'-9'). He thereby inverts the image of the god who runs before the victorious army, and threatens his opponent: "I will hunt you like a bear, and you will die from asphyxiation" (*CTH* 15.A ii 5-6).

So far we remain in the real world. A relatively large fragment of *CTH* 15, however, often referred to as the "Cannibal Legend," tells an outlandish story of an encounter with enemies so barbaric that it is unclear whether they are human.²¹ After we learn that one of them was fed a meal of cooked pork to ascertain whether he is god or human, which is suspiciously similar to an episode in the *Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin* (Güterbock 1938: 111-12; Mouton 2004), there is a break in the text, which picks up again at the moment when the mother of Zuppa, one of the enemy leaders, having been coldly abandoned by her son, is eaten by the savages. Whether or not either of these episodes has any basis in fact, we can see that as the Hittites pushed into unfamiliar territory they framed their encounters with the Other as an opposition between human and non-human.²² Thus, the term "manliness(es)," which Hattusili uses to describe his deeds, has multiple meanings, contrasting civilized humans with savage animals and gods, and male with female.

The fragmentary *Puhanu Chronicle*, which seems to refer to Hattusili's assault on Zalpa(r), presents three dramatic scenes described and explained by a first-person narrator,²³ perhaps Puhanu, the servant of a certain Sarmassu. It is one of the most puzzling of the Old Hittite historiographic texts, on which widely divergent interpretations have been offered. Any of these scenes could be descriptions of real-life performances, conforming to the Hittite penchant for acting out in their festivals dramatic episodes commemorating military victories.²⁴ The connecting thread between the three episodes is the consent and support of the Storm-god of Aleppo for the Hittite incursions into North Syria (Singer 1994: 87; Gilan 2004).²⁵ The first scene, describing a man dressed in a nice garment and carrying a bow and a basket, is followed by a series of paragraphs in direct speech, by one or more interlocutors saying, among other things:

I haven't taken anyone's male and female servants.

Why have you (plural) treated me so and bound this yoke upon me? (Therefore) I must always bring ice in this basket and keep fighting (until) I destroy the land(s) with these arrows . . .

Isn't that opponent of mine whom you escorted to Arinna my donkey? I will sit upon him/her, and you (plural) shall escort *me* there!

Who holds all the lands? Don't I fix in place all rivers, mountains and seas? (*CTH* 16a.A §§2–5, trans. Hoffner, in Hallo and Younger 1997: 184, slightly modified)

Whatever the point of this passage, we can see the same concerns as in the *Song of Release*, about unjust use of servants, while the donkey image seems to be demeaning.

Second comes a discussion about a bull with a bent horn who has moved mountains and just might be a statue representing the Storm-god taken as booty from a North Syrian temple (§6, see Gilan 2001: 278); the theriomorphic representation shows how deeply meaningful the animal symbols were to the worldview of the Hittites. The Storm-god of Aleppo himself ends up running before the army. In the final scene, two wrestlers wait for the Hurrians to attack “in the fourth year” and, as they describe it, to “bi[te] the country like a dog,” singing, “Clothes of Nesa, clothes of Nesa, hold me, hold me, take me down to my mother, hold me, hold me . . .” (*CTH* 16b.A §4).

In this last scene, the animal imagery leads into an otherwise unattested folk genre, often labeled a lament (which is simply a stab in the dark). *The Siege of Urshu* presents an equally puzzling example, when the king further lambastes his generals' failures in a speech that begins in Hittite and finishes in Akkadian:

The sons of Lariya and Lariya (himself), while inactive, sang the song (of² the War-god) Zababa: “We have *clogged*² the threshing-floor with *lahni*! The puppies were wearing helmets³!” They brought a fine ox of the threshing-floor, (but) they carried off (something that was) *not a shield*²; they brought a spindle, (but) they carried off (mere) reeds . . . (§9').²⁶

The spindle, a feminine implement, may allude to magical practices used to take away a man's virility (Hoffner 1966: 330–2; Haas 2002: 358–9), and thus the generals are both whelps and effeminate. It is likely that the compressed animal references, puzzling to us, drew on a shared stock of knowledge about animal behavior and stories in which animal characters were used to exemplify human failings.

The *Song of Release*, whether it was first composed in the Old Hittite period, when such literary experimentation was characteristic, or in the Middle Hittite period, when it was written down, fits right in with this model of conscious mythologizing to create political propaganda with a moral message, imbedding different genres within the main narrative through direct speech that incorporates animal imagery. The poem of the *Song of Release*, of which only part of the Hurrian side has been preserved, begins with a formulaic opening, setting the song firmly in the tradition of narrative poetry extending to Homer and Hesiod:

I shall sing of Teshshub, g[reat] lord of Kummi, I shall exalt the la[dy]
 Alla[ni], at the doorbolt of the earth
 And along with them I shall tell of the maiden Ishhara, the word-mak[er],
 famous for wisdom, goddess.

I shall tell of Pizikarra [. . .] Eb[la . . .] who will bring [. . .] Pizikarra
 was des[traying . . .] (from?) Nuhashshe.²⁷ And Ebla [. . .]
 (KBo 32.11 i 1–9)

We might expect, based on our earlier examples, that Pizikarra of the city of Nineveh was a real person. No words referring to the theme of the title of the song, “release,” are preserved in these opening lines, although it appears in a poorly preserved conversation about destroying Ebla in the final lines of the tablet, between the Hurrian Storm-god Teshshub and the North Syrian goddess Ishhara, which do not prepare us for the parables of the “second” tablet, which must belong to a separate textualization of the *Song of Release*.

The “second” tablet (KBo 32.12) and KBo 32.14 are devoted to parables, the latter the best preserved of all the tablets, with seven tales in total. The parables we can follow involve improper behavior by subordinates towards superiors, drumming home the same set of morals with different characters from the animal world and built environment: a foster son should not curse his benefactor, nor should a governor be too greedy.

A smith cast a cup for glory, he cast it and put it in proper form. He set it with ornamentation. He engraved it. He made it shine with brilliance. The one who cast it, him the foolish copper began to curse in return, “If only he who cast me, his hand would break off, and his right arm would be shriveled away!” When the smith heard, he was sickened within his heart.

The smith began to speak to his heart, “Why does the copper which I cast curse me in return?” And the smith against the cup said a curse, “May Teshshub strike it, the cup! May he wrench off its ornaments! May the cup fall into the canal! May its ornaments fall into the river!”

It is not a cup, (but) a man, that son who was an enemy against his father. He grew up. He reached maturity, and he no longer paid attention to his father. (He is a man) whom the gods of his father have cursed.

Leave aside that word. I will tell you another word. Listen to the message. I will tell you wisdom (Hurr. *madi*, Hitt. *battatar*).

A dog made off with a *kugulla*-bread from in front of an oven, he dragged it forth from the oven. He dipped it into oil, he dipped it in oil, he sat down and he began to eat it.

He is not a dog, he is a man, whom his lord made governor of a district. Afterwards he multiplied the collecting of taxes in that city, he became very “rebellious,” and further he did not look after the city. They were able to report him to his lord. The taxes that he had hoarded he began to pour out before his lord. (KBo 32.14 ii 42–iii 19)

These tablets as preserved make no overt reference to the rest of the story. The parables seem to be told by an intradiegetic narrator who explains the meaning of each parable and then moves to the next story with a repeated formula. Who is this narrator? It is tempting and perhaps legitimate to name the goddess Ishhara, described as “the word-mak[er], famous for wisdom (*madi*)” in the opening lines of the song (KBo 32.11 i 5–6). Perhaps Ishhara’s dialogue with Teshshub at the close

of the first tablet turned into a set of stories within the main story in the style of *A Thousand and One Nights* or the Sanskrit *Pancatantra*.

Once we leave the parables and move to the surrounding narrative, it is much more difficult to follow the thread of the action. Sections from at least three separate sequences of scenes can be reconstructed, two short passages involving the social life of the gods and one lengthy sequence involving the god Teshshub and members of the Eblaite assembly, which narrates some of the central actions relevant to the theme of “release” and the destruction of Ebla. The points of contention between two speakers, Zazalla, the best speaker of the assembly, and Meki, the king of Ebla, are whether Purra, son of Pazzanikari, and other people from the city of Ikingalis should be freed from their servitude, which is related to the question of whether Teshshub needs to be freed from suffering brought on by a shortage of offerings and the need to serve the ten kings of Ebla, nine of which are deceased and must be satisfied with the appropriate funerary cult (Bachvarova 2005a). Zazalla refuses to free the humans who cook and spin for him, and Meki seems helpless against Zazalla. Meki then falls before the god Teshshub, who seems to be some mixture of judge and claimant, weeping, defending his own innocence, and putting the blame on the assembly for not releasing the prisoners. Teshshub in turn responds with threats of utter destruction if the city does not release the slaves, but promises he will make it thrive if it complies.

The Ebla section and parable section are linked through the central act of Teshshub’s provisional curse or benediction upon the city, with its image of the broken cup:

If you don’t m[ake] release in [Eb]la, the city of the throne, then within seven da[ys],
I will come to you, yo[ur]selves, and I will destroy the ci[ty] of Ebla. As if it had n[ever]
been, so I will make it! The [lower] walls of the city of Ebla [like a c]up I will smash.
And the upper wall [li]ke a clay pit I will tram[ple]! (*KBo* 32.19 ii 20–31)

Zazalla, who speaks against king Meki and incites the city council to go against Teshshub’s demands, is comparable to the selfish, rebellious, and greedy subordinates who get their comeuppance in the parables. The message, then, of the parable section matches that of the Ebla section: when subordinates act unjustly, defying their king and patron, they cause their city to suffer and should be punished. This message in fact indicates to us the patron of the composition, who can be none other than the Hittite king himself, whether it is the Old Hittite king who destroyed the guilty city, or a Middle Hittite king who wished to make use of a negative historical example to enforce obedience in his assembly.

Yet another type of Old Hittite historiography consists of admonitory or wisdom texts which convey the king’s *hattatar* (wisdom) through a series of loosely connected historical examples.²⁸ It provides further literary and cultural context to the parable section. The two Old Hittite documents that will be examined here are *Hattusili’s Testament* and the *Palace Chronicles*, which share the same audience, purpose, and means of achieving that purpose as the *Song of Release* parables.

The *Testament* is laid out similarly to the *Song of Release*, with facing columns in Akkadian and Hittite.²⁹ Hattusili, finding himself very sick, addresses his successor Mursili and the nobles of his council (*pankus*), informing the nobles of his new candidate for future king and ordering them to support him. He tells several loosely connected stories from his life, defending his disciplining of subordinate members of his family, and finishes by dispensing his advice and commands to the *pankus* and Mursili alike.³⁰ In both the parables of the *Song of Release* and the *Testament*, the paramount topic is the betrayal and punishment of a son or protégé; when the son reaches maturity and it is time to pay his father back for all he has done, he instead neglects his father, disregarding his advice, even cursing him.

In his *Testament*, Hattusili indulges to the full his penchant for picturesque animal metaphors. Since one of Hattusili's main aims is to explain and defend his conduct towards the previous heir, his nephew, he first tells his audience of his negative experiences with him, how he raised him and looked after him, but then the nephew turned out to be cold as ice and susceptible to the seditious influence of his mother – “the snake!” (ii 10) – and other family members.³¹ He also tells them of his problems with his son Huzziya and a daughter. He had appointed them to govern towns, but then they were incited to rebellion by factions within the towns. Hattusili protests that he has not acted unjustly with his nephew, son, or daughter, considering their crimes, for he has provided for them adequately, only exiling them from Hattusa so that they cannot cause any more trouble (§§1–6).³²

In the parables of the *Song of Release*, the narrator overtly signals the transitions between stories with a formulaic paragraph beginning with “leave this word behind.” Then the next story usually begins with a noun referring to the main character, whether a deer, cup, or some other animal. After telling each story, the narrator explains its moral. This paragraph begins with a phrase like “It is not a cup, (but) a man, that son who . . .” (*KBo* 32.14 iii 1–2). Compare the section of the *Testament* in which Hattusili dismisses the story of his ungrateful foster son with the words, “Leave that aside. That one is not my son” (ii 14).³³ Unfortunately the Hittite side is badly damaged here, but the Akkadian continues, “His mother bellowed like a cow . . .” (i 14), introducing an archetype animal to represent the mother. The phrasing here seems to draw on the same stock of formulaic expressions as the *Song of Release*.

Then the king moves on to his advice to the young appointee – who is a lion like himself! (ii 39) – and to his council, demanding loyalty and restraint, especially during the crucial first few years when the new boy king is coming into his own.³⁴ The king's council may not interfere with the new king by giving improper counsel, disobeying him, or ignoring the commands of his predecessor. They must be like a pack of wolves (ii 46), with the king as the alpha male.³⁵ Mursili must not campaign for the first three years, then he can prove himself as military commander. While the king is still young, he should practice moderation in eating and drinking, just as the *pankus* should. When he is old, then he can get drunk to his heart's content. Hattusili reminds them that the gods must be properly attended to and fed (§§7–11, 19–21), and continues, “[The Great Kin]g, Labarna, began to [speak] to his son, Mursili.

I have given my word to you. Let them read this [table]t each month before you. Impress upon your heart my [wor]ld and my wisdom” (§22). Similarly in the parables, the narrator comments on the border commander who coveted another district, “the gods impressed wisdom upon that man” (*KBo* 32.14 ii 35–6).³⁶ Hattusili orders his grandson to keep a close eye on his subordinates, bringing them to justice if they sin.³⁷

Greed is the second of the sins the parables and the *Testament* focus on. Hattusili’s children take far more than is their share, whether of livestock, fields, or power (§§5, 14–18), while in the parables a greedy border commander is compared to the deer who found the grass greener on the other side of the river (*KBo* 32.14 ii 26–38), and another parable compares such men to a dog who snatches a pastry from the oven, dunks it into a jar of oil and gobbles it up.

But perhaps the dog parable in the *Song of Release* is better compared to the Nunnu episode in the *Palace Chronicles*. Like the *Siege of Urshu*, the *Chronicles* are concerned with the mistakes and sins of Hattusili’s subordinates and Hattusili’s response, involving often unusual and picturesque punishments, told in a series of loosely connected stories with liberal use of direct quotes.³⁸ People known from other historical narratives also make an appearance in the *Palace Chronicles*, like Sanda from the *Siege of Ursu* and – in the episode quoted here – Sarmassu from the *Puhannu Chronicle* (de Martino and Imparati 2003: 253–4):

Nunnu was the man of Hurma in Arzawa. And he didn’t bring silver and gold. What he finds, that one carries to his own house. The man of Huntara informed on him. The father of the king sent (for him). They sent him forth. And, he ordered Sarmassu to take his place [. . .]. And he wouldn’t come. The father of the king sent the Man of the Golden Spear (instead). They drove Sarmassu and Nunnu to the mountain Tahaya. They yoked them like oxen. They seized the in-law of Nunnu [. . .]. He destroyed the eyes of Sarmassu and Nunnu. . . . (*CTH* 8.A i 11–18)

While the dog represents the governor who collects excessive taxes, Nunnu diverts taxes or donations to his own home. In the parables the people are able to inform on the governor, and he is forced to regurgitate his ill-gotten gains, while Nunnu is recalled from his position and humiliated by being cast out and driven like an ox, yoked together with Sarmassu, just as Hattusili had yoked together the leaders of Hahhu and Hassu (*Hattusili’s Annals* §19), to symbolize their subordination to Hattusili. Finally, a relative is forced to blind the two administrators! Thus, Hattusili sets himself up as the stern protector of the people against the arrogance and greed of the Hittite nobles, just as Meki attempted to protect the captive people of Ikinkalis from Zazalla and the other members of the Eblaite assembly.

The Hurrian singer is very heavy-handed with his parables in the *Song of Release*. He explicates fully the animal analogy; he repeats it several times, making sure that the parable about the cup who curses its maker and is dashed to pieces by him is picked up in the Ebla story line by Teshshub’s threat to smash Ebla like a cup. Still, we have here essentially the same process of vivid exemplification of a human condition

through pregnant symbolism found in Hattusili's description of himself as a virile and lordly lion, his sister as a treacherous snake, or his incompetent generals as puppies wearing helmets, or the enacting of humiliation by yoking offenders like oxen. All these allusions to quasi-Jungian animal archetypes in fact call up metonymically the kind of tale that is so laboriously spelled out in the *Song of Release*. In the same way Homer's animal similes, which I think we now accept as integral to the text, also rely on a shared pool of observations of animal behavior to explain human behavior. In fact, as Leonard Muellner (1990) has argued, the very incongruities in the similes indicate that the relatively brief narratives allude to fuller, stand-alone versions known to the audience outside of the epic.

Furthermore, the use of animal similes in Greek heroic narrative has been compared to the scenes of battle narrative juxtaposed with a lion chasing a deer in the surrounding countryside in the famous miniature fresco from the north wall of Thera dating to the sixteenth century (S. Morris 1989: 516–31). Already in the earliest extant examples of Minoan-Mycenaean art, violent scenes of animal dominating animal are juxtaposed with battle scenes between Mycenaeans and foreigners, distinguished by their clothing and dark skin, to send the message that coercive control and elite dominance reflect the natural order of things (Morgan 1995; C. Morris 1999). Thus, the Mycenaeans could frame their military victories as legendary exploits against uncouth barbarians, as in the Zukrashi tale, with the implicit analogy of man hunting beast. The fresco in Hall 64 at Pylos depicts men in Mycenaean greaves, tunics, and already archaic boar tusk helmets (Shelmerdine 1996: 474–7) defeating in hand-to-hand combat men in shaggy skins and without armor; juxtaposed with this violent scene is a frieze of bright-eyed crouching hunting dogs. It has been suggested that this fresco celebrates the relatively recent consolidation of power in the Messenian plain of the Mycenaeans in the beginning of the Late Helladic III B period (c. 1320), offering different messages for the conquered and conquerors (Davis and Bennet 1999).

It is not hard to imagine that in the Mycenaean period the palace elite, like the Hittites, oversaw the conscious manufacture of legend out of recent history to be performed at the large-scale feasts documented at Pylos and other sites, in Greek and perhaps other now lost languages. It is not unlikely in my opinion that the Mycenaeans had a written literature, but it is true that there is no evidence of writing as a demonstration of power mixed in with the frescoes, as we see it in the contemporary Near Eastern empires. If the Mycenaeans did distill annalistic history or legal codes from primary documents, as the Hittites did, all these were lost with the loss of literacy, and only the orally transmitted legends lived on.

In any case, images like these suggest that not all similarities between the texts found at Hattusa and the later hexametric tradition are due to borrowing in the Orientalizing Period. Besides the very good probability that Homeric and Hesiodic performers were in contact with an Anatolian song tradition continued from the Late Bronze Age, there is some possibility of borrowing in the Late Bronze Age, when the gods were imported along with their cult performers, at festivals with supralocal audiences, and through long-distance elite interactions like that of Telemachus's

voyage in the *Odyssey* (Bachvarova 2009). Certainly, as Hubert Cancik (1993: 127) has pointed out, we know that the Mycenaeans came into contact with the Hittite conception of history in the characteristic historical preambles presented in international letters to the king of Ahhiyawa (wherever Ahhiyawa might have been in mainland Greece or on Greek-occupied islands).³⁹ But we should not neglect the strong possibility that many of the similarities in the ways of thinking that we can see in the Hittite material, Mycenaean art, and the later Greek epic tradition come from a common pool of conceptions of how man fits into his world, in which man is compared to animal to explore and explain man's relationship with the gods and to turn natural history into human history.

Here I turn to the implications of the parables in the *Song of Release* for our understanding of the prehistory of Greek hexametric poetry and of how epic as a genre was delineated. In particular, these implications can illuminate the three-way relationship between so-called didactic epic like that of Hesiod, narrative epic, and admonitory history, and the use of imbedded narrative to convey a didactic message as found in the *Song of Release*. Didactic poetry, which tries to explain the world around us through analogies and metaphors and gives advice on appropriate behavior, not only has a long and distinguished tradition on a par with heroic epic loosely based on historical events, but the two traditions are interwoven throughout their development. One of the oldest literary texts ever discovered has close parallels with the portion of the *Works and Days* devoted to precepts on farming, home economics, and right living (West 1971: 28–9). The *Instructions of Shuruppak* (dated to 2400, trans. Black et al. 2004: 284–92) is directed to his son Ziusudra, who himself is remembered as the only man to survive the Great Flood and makes an appearance in the Sumerian lay *The Death of Gilgamesh* (57, 74–7, trans. George 1999: 198–9) as the last human allowed to live forever. His Akkadian counterpart Atrahasis/Utnapishtim is featured both in the *Atrahasis* epic telling the story of the Deluge and in the *Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh* epic, where he narrates to Gilgamesh his own epic story and dispenses advice on the ways in which the king can best make use of his life while on earth.

While the author of the *Song of Release* makes a heavy-handed attempt to use an imbedded authoritative narrative to make clear the moral implications of its heroes' tragic trajectory in the larger "epic" narrative, both the author of the *Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh* and Homer are able to make much more sophisticated use of this technique, the latter with the mini-epic tales of Nestor, that eye-witness to the heroic exploits of a previous generation, and most brilliantly in the much discussed speech of Phoenix during the embassy to Achilles in Book 9 of the *Iliad*. Phoenix, having established his moral authority as elder and teacher (9.438–43), moves into a recapitulation of his own life story, which in its telling of how a dispute over a concubine separated Phoenix from his father and destroyed any hope of having a family of his own (9.447–95), has a clear message to Achilles, even as it establishes the even more important right Phoenix has to supplicate Achilles, based on his sincere fatherly love for him. Phoenix pauses to tell a little parable personifying Prayer and Curse (9.502–12), then introduces his own epic narrative of Meleager, recounting the

glories of men of the past (9.524). As is typical of the best tellings of Greek myths, the author works in counterpoint to other known versions and the audience is aware that the alterations are meant to highlight the message of his tale, here structured to show how a previous hero, letting go of his anger too late, did save his city, but lost the rich gifts promised by his supplicating relatives, and his life besides. Achilles of course refuses to hear the message, but Homer's audience will be using Phoenix's story as a key to analyze the subsequent action of the *Iliad* (Rosner 1976; Scodel 1982; Swain 1988). These stories, imbedded in the larger narrative, should in fact be seen as representing early forms of orally told history, recognizable to the original audience, about events in the relatively recent past, always with a message to shape contemporary action, and using timeless parables to illustrate that message. Thus, the interplay between admonitory history and epic, the inclusion of complementary genres by means of *emboîtement* as found in the Hittite texts, continued into the time when Homer's composition began to reach its final form.

Hesiod's didactic poem *Works and Days* is a narrative like Phoenix's about relatively recent events, although different weights are given to the parts, with the instructions taking over the bulk of the text and the narrative about events much reduced. Furthermore, the different sections are more loosely joined, with a change of subject marked in a manner similar to that of the parables in the *Song of Release*: "If you wish, I will indeed briefly go over another story well and with understanding; and you put it into your mind" (106–7). While the *Works and Days* fits quite closely with the kind of admonitory history built out of a series of stories exemplified by the *Palace Chronicles* and *Hattusili's Testament*, a key difference is that the *Palace Chronicles* and Hittite admonitory history in general are devoted to showing how just the king and patron is in contrast to his corrupt officials, how straight his judgments are, while Hesiod speaks from the perspective of the middling man, both the farmer and the singer (*dēmiourgos*), the man who deserves to be protected from injustice by the *basileis* who sit in judgment on his case (I. Morris 2000: 163–71).⁴⁰

Hesiod informs us that he has composed the poem to admonish his brother Perses, who has won a crooked judgment against him by bribing the lordly judges (27–40). The poet's intention is to teach his audience that humans must work hard and act justly in order to live the good life. He begins by telling a portion of the prehistory of man; the exhibition of this antediluvian knowledge not only sets the stage for the corrupt contemporary world in which he lives, but also invests him with the same kind of authority as Atrahasis in *Gilgamesh*. He moves on to the hawk and nightingale fable, which is meant to show Perses how easy it would be for the gods to crush him, while also demonstrating how Hesiod, a songster like the nightingale, is being crushed by the rapacious judges (202–11). Next is a personification of Right and Oaths, paralleling Phoenix's little tale of Curse and Prayer. Hesiod then admonishes the crooked judges, "To whom bad hybris and harsh deeds have been a care, for them wide-seeing Zeus, son of Kronos, ordains justice. Often also the entire city suffers from a bad man, whoever offends and devises wicked things" (238–41). The point here is the same as that of the *Palace Chronicles*, *Hattusili's Testament*, and the *Song of Release*, and in fact it is an important point in the story of the fall of Troy,

although our version downplays the crooked judgment made by the Trojan council, swayed by gifts, which allowed Paris to keep Helen (Sale 1994: 65–80). Thus, Hesiod, although more recent than Homer, composed a historical epic that was more archaic in terms of its narrative techniques and overall point.

In lieu of a conclusion I would like to point out that many of the topoi and techniques discussed here are found not only in Hittite history and epic, in Homer and Hesiod, but also in Herodotus. While his technique, especially in Book 1, is most often compared to tragedy, he himself makes a point of comparing his work to Homer by starting out with the story of Helen. He is equally interested in defining what humankind is as he is in the historical events in which men and women were involved; he tells tales, some rather fantastic to us, about recent history that have moral implications for his audience; and he imbeds narratives that seem to be digressions to us, but always support his main point. The analysis of narrative techniques and themes I present here therefore sheds light not only on the pre-history of Greek epic, but also on the prehistory of Greek historiography.

Notes

- 1 I am indebted to my Hurrian teacher, Professor Gene Gragg, and my Hittite teacher, Professor Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., both at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. I use Neu's (1996) edition of the *Song of Release* (CTH 789) throughout. There is an English translation of the *Song of Release* by Harry A. Hoffner, Jr. (1998a: 65–77) and a German translation by Haas (2006: 177–92). The abbreviation CTH refers to the designation of a Hittite text in Laroche's *Catalogue des textes hittites* (1971). Sources for the Hittite texts by CTH or KBo (*Keilschrifttexte aus Boğazköi*) number are easily located in Silvin Košak's electronic database, *Konkordanz der hethitischen Texte*, accessible through www.hethiter.net. My discussion here is complementary to that in Bachvarova forthcoming, in which interrelations between the *Song of Release* and other Hurro-Hittite epics, Mesopotamian historical and literary narratives, and the *Iliad* are analyzed. I avoid using diacritics on Hittite *s*, *h*, and long vowels. All dates are BCE, all translations my own, unless otherwise noted.
- 2 On the Hittite, Hurrian and Akkadian versions of *Gilgamesh* found at Hattusa, see Beckman 2003; on *Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, see West 1997: 402–17.
- 3 The *Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin* is found in Old Babylonian, Middle Babylonian, and Standard Babylonian versions, collected in Westenholz 1997: 263–368. The Hittite version (CTH 311) is translated by Haas (2006: 72–6). *Sargon, King of Battle* is also found at Hattusa in Hittite (CTH 310, trans. Haas 2006: 68–71).
- 4 Some have argued that the fables are not in fact part of the final textualization of the Ebla narrative, but are *paralipomena* (Wilhelm 2001b: 83–5; Otto 2001: 529).
- 5 On the find and the other contents of the jar, see Klinger 2001b: 205–6. The verb forms used in the parables are somewhat more archaic than those in the Ebla story (Campbell 2007: 28, n. 29, illustrated throughout his dissertation). Compare the much-discussed linguistic differences between the Homeric similes and the rest of the narrative.
- 6 It is clear that there were multiple textualizations, because KBo 32.16 iii contains a passage that cannot be included in the version of the assembly scene told in KBo 32.15.

- 7 We should in fact expect that the first version of the epic concerning the fall of Ebla was performed within a generation of the events, whichever of the two events it might be referring to. See also Raaflaub 1998: 179–80.
- 8 Similarly, the fact that Paris's alternate name of Alexander matches the name of the king of Wilusa with whom the New Hittite king Muwatalli II made a treaty (c. 1300) indicates that either there was a well-known king of Troy with this name in Mycenaean times, or Alexander was a traditional name in the Trojan royal line stretching back into the second millennium. On the relationship between the events in the *Iliad* and actual Bronze Age events, see most recently Latacz (2004) and Grethlein in this volume. Raaflaub 2005: 59–60, 63–4 uses comparative material from medieval epic to show how epic memory distorts historical events.
- 9 The dating of Tell Mardikh IIB1 is disputed. Archi and Biga 2003 detail a set of synchronisms between Mari, Babylon, and Ebla to argue that Tell Mardikh IIB1 was destroyed by Mari about ten years before Sargon seized power, despite the fact that both Sargon and his grandson insist that they have conquered Ebla. See also Klengel 1992: 23.
- 10 CTH 14 III.B.ii 13' (transliterated with Italian translation by de Martino 2003: 91–127). The text also mentions Urshu, Hassu, Aleppo, Zalpa(r), and Yarim-Lim, a historical king of Yamhad, to which Aleppo belonged. The destruction of Tell Mardikh IIB has been attributed either to Hattusili I or, more likely, his adopted son (biological grandson) Mursili I, during the Hittite forays into North Syria (Klengel 1992: 24).
- 11 Ikakala, CTH 4.II.A i 18. On Ikinkalis see Neu 1996: 332–3.
- 12 Klengel et al. 1999: 23 mentions it among the sources for early Hittite history. Wilhelm 1996: 22 considers the possibility that it “belongs to a tradition much older than the actual copy and translation preserved in Hattusa.”
- 13 See Klengel 1992: 80–3; Bryce 1998: 75–84; Hoffner 1998b: 75–84; Wilhelm 1989: 20–3. There are hints of more peaceful relations between Hurrian-speakers and Hittites (Beal 2003).
- 14 On the other hand, the *Song of Release* exists only in Middle Hittite copies.
- 15 CTH 4, extant in seven New Hittite copies and one Akkadian copy (German trans. Haas 2006: 33–41; English trans. Beckman in Chavalas 2006: 219–22). My discussion is based on the Hittite version.
- 16 Uchitel 1999 provides an outline of the legends, comparing them to the *Annals*.
- 17 Collins 1998 and Archi 1988 both discuss Hittite animal imagery. Watanabe 2002: 10–14 reviews the study of animal metaphor in Mesopotamian literature in her analysis of the meaning of animal symbolism in Neo-Assyrian depictions of the royal lion hunt.
- 18 CTH 7, in Akkadian by a native Hittite speaker (German trans. Haas 2006: 42–6; English trans. and discussion in Beckman 1995). This text also mentions Zuppa, whose mother was eaten by cannibals (rev. 25, 29), see below.
- 19 CTH 15, trans. Haas 2006: 46–7.
- 20 The Tikunani letter (of unknown provenance) seems to be from Hattusili I, sent shortly before the Hittite attack on Hahhu to the king of Tikunani, a city localized somewhere between the Euphrates and the Tigris, within a few days' march of Hahhu and mentioned in Hattusili's *Annals* §17 (Salvini 1994: 69; 1996: 11–13; Miller 2001b: 43). The man addressed is a Hurrian by the name of Tuniya (i.e., Tunip-Teshshup), and a man who calls himself *labarna*, “king,” urges him on in Akkadian, using Hattusili's typically colorful animal metaphors to raid Hahhu. See further Miller 2001b and de Martino 2002.

- 21 *CTH* 17, trans. Haas 2006: 51–4, and see de Martino 2002.
- 22 Similarly, a text that Amir Gilan discusses in his contribution to this volume begins with a legend creating a mythical excuse for the historical destruction of the northern Anatolian town of Zalpa (Zalpuwa), since the 30 sons of its queen have committed a crime against nature by engaging in incest with their 30 sisters (*CTH* 2, German trans. Haas 2006: 20–8; English trans. Hoffner in Hallo and Younger 1997: 181–2). Note that the town Zalpa(r) of the *Annals* is not the same as the Zalpuwa of *CTH* 2 (Miller 2001a: 70–4).
- 23 *CTH* 16, see Gilan 2001. Zidi and Sarmassu, who appear in the *Puhannu Chronicle*, are cross-referenced in the *Palace Chronicles* (de Martino and Imparati 2003: 253–4).
- 24 On dramatic enactments in festivals see Gilan 2001.
- 25 Compare the story Herodotus (1.60) tells of how the tyrant Peisistratus legitimized his return to power by entering Athens in a chariot with a statuesque woman dressed like Athena, proclaiming that her personal presence showed her support.
- 26 Beckman (1995: 26), whose translation I quote, suggests that we have here an example of Hittite humor.
- 27 Nuhashshe was a Hurrian-occupied area in North Syria.
- 28 See Beckman 1986: 26–9.
- 29 *CTH* 6 (German trans. Haas 2006: 59–65; English trans. Goedegebuure in Chavalas 2006: 222–8). The *Tawannanna Decree* (*CTH* 5, trans. Haas 2006: 65–6) is a document which shares many correspondences in topic and phraseology with the *Testament* (Carruba 1992: 77–8); in it the king demands that Hattusili’s newly appointed successor Mursili be accepted and the scheming “Tawannanna” (usually translated as “queen”) excommunicated on pain of death. In the decree the rulers of Hassu and Zalpa(r) are held up as examples of men who ignored the king’s word and received the punishment they deserved, with Aleppo next in line (28–31).
- 30 The colophon of the *Testament*, in Akkadian, describes it as “Tablet of the Tabarna, great king, when he was very ill in Kussar and advised (*uwāru*) his son about kingship.” The Akkadian root *wu’uru* probably corresponds to the Hittite noun *battatar* (Hoffner 1980: 324).
- 31 The same expression is used in the *Tawannanna Decree* 27, and *Hattusili’s Testament* ii 20.
- 32 He tells one more tale with obvious implications for his audience, of the evil fate of those who had assassinated his ancestor’s chosen successor.
- 33 Hoffner compared the use of the expression “leave that aside” in *Hattusili’s Testament* and the *Song of Release* in his notes for the Hittite class of spring 1998.
- 34 The lion image, associated with Zababa, the Battle-god, and also found in the *Annals*, was standard for Near Eastern royalty. See Collins 1998; Hoffner 1980: 297, 301–2.
- 35 The translation of *wetnas* as “wolf” derives from the similarity of this line with the *Tawannanna Decree* (*CTH* 6 15–16): “And let your *pankus*, my servants, be as one like that of the wolf,” on which see Carruba 1992: 77–80; Haas 2006: 62.
- 36 Compare the words of the king from the *Palace Chronicles*: “impress this upon your heart” (*CTH* 8A i 23, trans. Haas 2006: 56), discussed in Hoffner’s in-class notes June 1, 1998.
- 37 He then finishes up with some cryptic instructions or complaints about a woman Tastaya, seemingly in reference to her ritual obligations towards him once he is dead; see Bryce 1998: 98–9.
- 38 *CTH* 8–9 (trans. Haas 2006: 54–9). The “king” in the text is Mursili and the “father” is Hattusili.

- 39 Bryce 1998: 59–63 provides one of the more sensible discussions on possible locations of Ahhiyawa. I do not believe, as Latacz 2004: 241–4 does, that Thebes was Ahhiyawa.
- 40 Homer follows a third point of view, that of the elite who can question the judgment of their king (I. Morris 2000: 171–8).

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Epic and History in the Hebrew Bible: Definitions, “Ethnic Genres,” and the Challenges of Cultural Identity in the Biblical Book of Judges¹

SUSAN NIDITCH

“Oral literature,” “poetry,” “epic,” and “history” are central to the interests of this volume. Each of these terms, however, poses formidable problems of definition in relation to the Israelite tradition. Dan Ben Amos’s important methodological study on ethnic genres (1976) motivates us to ask how or if the Israelites thought in terms of such categories. Did ancient Hebrew, for example, have a terminology for epic or for poetry or contain key lexical markers of such genres? Does comparative work suggest the existence of Israelite genres comparable to what European scholars might deem to be epic?

The present chapter addresses the challenge of Israelite epic within a framework of categories outlined by the folklorist Alan Dundes (1980: 20–32): “text”: the work’s content and structure; “texture”: style, including formulaic qualities of expression; and “context”: the setting of the work, both literary and cultural. This study reveals ambiguities implicit in the concept of poetry in ancient Israel, points to the important interplay between the oral and the written in the compositions of the Hebrew Bible, and asks whether and where we can talk about an epic genre in ancient Israel. We will then turn to history, another area that raises a variety of questions. How did the ancient Israelites understand their “history” or the genre “historiography”? Does the epic-like material of the Hebrew Bible have anything to do with history as actual events of the past? To approach these complex methodological questions and areas of inquiry, we will make specific reference to the biblical book of Judges, a collection of tales about various rambunctious warrior heroes set, within the biblical chronology, in the early days of Israelite presence in the land.

Text: The Judges as Epic Heroes?

The judges are frequently regarded as epic heroes. Folklorist Richard Dorson provides a brief but masterful overview of traits that recur in various traditions. He notes that

many of the works that might be regarded as epic are “stirring traditional narrative(s) of perilous adventure, daring, and manhood” (1978: 4). He observes that heroes manifest human qualities such as bravery or physical might, that they often have divine helpers, and that they may use “guile” as well as strength to vanquish enemies. Underlying story patterns involve conquests, travels, and valor, but the relationship of epic to history is complex, for “the hero of history attracts splendid legends and the hero of fiction assumes a realistic and historical dimension, so that they tend to converge over the course of the epic and saga process” (ibid.).

Dorson’s observations apply well to tales of judges and the early kings. Whether one uses the term “epic” or not, the Israelites produced a literature entirely comparable to those of the many cultural traditions explored by Dorson. Such narratives held appeal within ancient Israel as elsewhere and were employed in culturally specific ways as a deeply expressive means of asserting and declaring national and ethnic identity. In Israelite tradition “epic heroes” also often partake of a character in international folklore that Eric Hobsbawm (1969) dubs the “social bandit.”

Social bandits

A warrior chief endowed with charisma and empowered by God, the judge has a special social and political function in Judges as defender of the weak against the strong. The judge fights for those who are marginalized and against the interests of the establishment. The “deliverers” of Judges compare well with Eric Hobsbawm’s “social bandits” or “primitive rebels.” Robin Hood is perhaps the most famous primitive rebel in Western folklore. A social historian, Hobsbawm locates social banditry “in all types of human society which lie between the evolutionary phase of tribal and kinship organization, and modern capitalist society” (1969: 14). While the rise of capitalism is not relevant to biblical material, the tales of the judges and early kings do mark a significant transition between a socio-structural group identity based upon kinship and one organized around a state, such as the monarchies of the ancient Near East. Admired by their communities, social bandits are “champions, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation” (ibid.: 13).

Young men of rural origins, bandits arise during periods of transition and flux. They are often marginal figures in their own societies, sometimes victims of injustice, and are characteristically rebels. They kill in just vengeance or self-defense and, in Israelite versions, are tricksters who often succeed through deception. The judges and early kings, Saul and David, suit this list of criteria beautifully, although Moses as well might qualify as a social bandit in the narratives of Exodus. Gideon, Saul, and David all have agrarian or pastoral roots. Jephthah is an illegitimate son of a prostitute, denied rights by his brothers, and Deborah is a female leader, an unusual role in this literature about men. Ehud is a left-handed man in a symbolic world in which the “normal” preferred side is the right, and David, a youngest son, is an enemy of the Saulide establishment. All of these heroes qualify in ancient Israel for the designation “marginal.” Samson is an explosive hero, a type of bandit Hobsbawm calls “the avenger” because his warring boils over into uncontrolled manifestations

of violence. He takes shelter in caves, kills with his bare hands, and is Israel's weapon against the powerful and oppressive Philistines. The judges, plus Saul and David, confront Israel's political and cultural enemies in war and save their people. Thus the judge, the epic hero, and the social bandit converge as one seeks to characterize the stories of Judges and their protagonists. The prominence of war in these tales is another critical element in understanding Judges as a national foundation narrative.

War and the judges

Warring in tales of the early Israelite heroes, including the biblical judges and the early kings, is characterized by a specific bardic ideology, by certain roles played by women, and by the juxtaposition of themes of eroticism and death. War is sport to these "men of valor," as Gideon, David, and his men are called.² Combat is a contest in which heroes use special, sometimes unusual, weapons and skills.³ Abner, the general of Saul, proposes to Joab, David's general, that the lads on each side "rise up and make sport before us" (2 Sam. 2:12–16). They do so, but the contest between warriors ends in death for all of them. Opponents frequently engage in taunting behavior before or during battle (e.g., Goliath and David) and nevertheless respect the skill of their enemies. A certain code applies whereby men of comparable experience and skill are expected to confront one another in battle. Goliath thus resents the young man David in the cameo scene in 1 Sam. 17:41–9, and Abner hesitates to kill Joab's younger brother, Asahel, who insists upon pursuing him in battle (2 Sam. 2:21–2). Respect for the enemy is also evident in the conversation between Gideon and the captured Midianite kings (Judg. 8:20). They comment on the noble demeanor of Israelites they have killed in battle and ask that Gideon be the one to kill them, because his son, a less experienced warrior, is not up to the task.

Much of the fighting in Judges through 2 Samuel is between Israelites and non-Israelite enemies, but battle frequently erupts among Israelites themselves over the distribution of booty, leadership rights, or perceived insults. The civil war between the forces of Saul and David is one of the lengthiest of these accounts, but also in this category are Gideon's vengeance in Judges 8, Abimelech's rebellion in Judges 9, Jephthah's confrontation with the men of Ephraim in Judges 12, and the civil war in Judges 20–1.

Central in the relationships between warriors are women. They frequently serve as prizes of war and as valuable items of exchange, creating or confirming relationships between men. Michal is the prize the hero David receives from King Saul, her father, in return for 100 Philistine foreskins (1 Sam. 18:17–29). Achsah is rewarded to the hero Othniel by Caleb (Judg. 1:12–15). In the case of Saul and David, however, as in the cases of Samson's marriage to the Philistine Timnite woman and the affair with Delilah, the relationship leads to or reflects enmity rather than accord. The sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter as a war vow in Judg. 11:29–40 also reflects this theme of exchange between males, but in this case the recipient of the valuable woman prize is God. The girl is offered as a sacrifice to the Lord in return for Jephthah's

success in battle. Jael, slayer of the enemy general Sisera, is mistakenly perceived by Sisera as a helper because of his king's relationship to her husband (Judg. 4:17). The characters are portrayed to assume the existence of certain kinds of bonds between men of power, bonds often mediated by women. Instead of serving as a mediator of this positive relationship, however, Jael serves the cause of the Israelites, a subversive manifestation of the folk motif of "the iron fist in the velvet glove."

The treatment of women sometimes sets the occasion for war, as in the case of the rape and murder of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19. This crime leads to civil war when the men of Benjamin side with their kinsmen in Gibeah, where the heinous incident occurred, rather than back pan-Israelite vengeance. In 1 Samuel 30, David attacks and defeats the Amalekites who had stolen his women in a raid. Women are also involved in the process of reconciliation even while their voices and experiences offer a critique of men's wars. It is the stealing of the women of Shiloh at the end of the war and the forced marriage of daughters from the town of Jabesh-gilead that close the hostilities in Judges 21. The words of Sisera's mother and her ladies in waiting in Judges 5 serve as an implicit critique of the phenomenon of war, which creates heroes but eliminates sons and enslaves daughters.

Finally, the Israelite war tradition equates death on the battlefield with sex. As shown by Emily Vermeule for Homeric material, the defeated warrior metaphorically is the woman who has been raped (1979: 101). The language and imagery of the tale of Jael and Sisera purposefully commingle military death and sexual conquest. Terms such as "kneel" and "lie," and the phrase "between her legs," found in Judg. 5:27, create the *double entendre* in a traditional Israelite medium (Niditch 1989). Tales of the heroes Ehud (Judg. 3:12–30) and Samson (Judg. 16) are similarly informed (see Niditch 1993: 113–19; 1990: 116–17).

Thus on the level of content, allowing for particular Israelite interests and orientation, the tales of the judges and early kings look a lot like epic traditions explored by Dorson, Vermeule, and others. What about the texture of the material and Israelite terminology that might suggest epic performance? Questions concerning formulaicity, prosody, and qualities of the oral tradition are relevant in this context.

On Textures: Repetition, Poetry and Prose, Oral and Written

The style of the literature about heroes in Judges is fully traditional as is much of the Hebrew Bible. Repetition within tales and across the biblical corpus is common, for example, as authors frequently use the same language to convey similar content. Certain key phrases may, in fact, be markers of an Israelite ethnic genre comparable to "epic." Possible candidates for such markers of epic are the phrases, *wyby bymym lhm*, literally, "And it was in those days" or "It came to pass in those days," the related *bymym lhm*, "in those days," *wyby bymy*, "And it was in the days of X," and *wyby ys*, "And there was a man."

Wyby, the so-called waw-consecutive of the imperfect form of the verb “to be,” is used throughout ancient Hebrew narrative to demarcate time (Sasson 2001; van der Merwe 1999). In an extremely common use of this term, the narrator provides a specific time-frame for the scene or story that follows: for instance, “(It was) at that time” (Gen. 21:22, 38:1; 1 Kgs 11:29) or “(It was) at the end of X amount of time”⁴ or “(It was) on the next day.”⁵ Less common throughout the narrative portions of the Hebrew Bible, though represented densely in certain clusters,⁶ is the temporal phrase “And it was in those days” and the briefer variant “In those days.” The context for all of these usages is foundation myth, stories concerning the genesis of the people, often including a war or battle and reference to the career of a hero. The formulaic phrases mark tales of olden times. After such a phrase, often the story of a war or battle that took place in the significant past soon follows.⁷ Judges 21:25, a formula concerning the days when “there was no king in Israel” (found also in 17:6, 18:1, and 19:1), comments on the battles that have just been described. At Judges 20:21 and 1 Samuel 3:1, particular heroes are introduced who are significant in a cultural history. Variations upon the phrase “in those days” do seem to frame the sort of content scholars have found in epic. And the phrase is found densely in a specific corpus of similar tales, tales from the days of the early rulers of Israel.

Two additional temporal phrases may signal epic material in the Hebrew Bible. The first phrase, “It was in the days of King X,” alludes to some aspect of the career of a king. Genesis 14:1 and Isaiah 7:1 are both preludes to battle accounts, while Esther 1:1 introduces the tale of threat to Jews in diaspora that ends in self-defense, battle, and survival. The reference in Genesis 14 is especially interesting because it places Abraham in a heroic, epic-like setting, quite in contrast to other patriarchal accounts. This mock-heroic tale may suggest that Israelites themselves recognized and adapted an epic genre (Niditch 1993: 101–2). The second phrase, “There was a man,” is found densely in Judges through 2 Samuel⁸ and introduces a figure who will be part of an important founding myth, often the hero’s progenitor (Samson’s father Manoah in Judg. 13:2; Samuel’s father in 1 Sam. 1:1; Saul’s father in 1 Sam. 9:1). Elsewhere, the phrase introduces a key player in a series of events in a foundation tale (Judg. 17:1, 19:1, 2 Sam. 21:20). A close examination of language in Judges in a comparative biblical context thus seems to reveal certain linguistic markers of heroic and perhaps “epic” material.

The authors of tales in Judges also take special pleasure in having characters use media of oral performance, riddles and *mēšālīm*, a term rooted in the meaning “to be like” and sometimes translated “parable” or “proverb.” Thus Samson propounds a riddle at his wedding in traditional style (Noy 1963; Judg. 14:14) and responds to his opponents in proverbial language (v. 18). Gideon calms the Ephraimites, jealous for booty, with a proverb emphasizing their honor – much in these battle accounts has to do with men’s shame and honor (8:2). Enemy kings, facing their own defeat or death, speak in proverbs (Adonibezek in 1:7 and Zebah and Zalmunna in 8:21; cf. 1 Kgs 20:11). Jotham employs a traditional-style narrative built on metaphors, a *māšāl*, to deliver a stinging political critique of the illegitimate ruler Abimelech, who has murdered all of his rivals for power (Judg. 9:7–21). Finally, the judge

Jephthah offers a case for the justness of his cause in battle with a rhetorically rich speech that draws upon the traditional history of the exodus (11:4–28).

Registers and redaction

The present use of the term “register” is influenced by the work of Dell Hymes, who defines registers as “major speech styles associated with recurring types of situations” (1989: 440), and by the application of concepts concerning “register” to oral-traditional works by John Foley. Foley describes registers as ways of communicating that are “contextually appropriate signals for institutionalized meanings” (1995: 50). The register is “an expressive code” (ibid.). As a student of oral-derived literatures, Foley asks, in particular, to “what sort of language” performers “resort in order to carry on the project of co-creating the work,” a work set within a particular cultural context (ibid.: 49). The notion of register is helpful as we explore the possible relationships between the varieties of Hebrew style employed in the Bible and the information or messages that might be conveyed by those styles or by switches in those styles.

Scholars have long sought to employ linguistic criteria to match examples of biblical Hebrew with particular historical periods or literary sources in order to explore issues of provenance, authorship, and redaction history.⁹ A careful analysis of syntax and style has led Frank Polak to suggest the existence of a spectrum of registers in biblical Hebrew that reflects a relative chronology. At one end is the classical style characterized by a high number of short clauses, dominance of finite verb forms, a rarity of subordinate clauses, and a rarity of noun strings. At the other end is late Hebrew with long noun strings and complex sentences “in which a single predicate governs a high number of arguments and subordinate clauses,” some of which are achieved via participles and infinitive clauses (Polak 1998: 65). In the late style, noun forms are in higher ratio than verb forms and nominal forms of the verb are more numerous than finite verbs. Between these two ends Polak identifies a somewhat more intricate classical form and a somewhat simpler transitional late form. It is interesting that tales of Samson (Judg. 13–16) provide one of his cases for the simplest or purist classical form (Polak 1998: 78, 87), while Judges 3–4, 6–9, 11–12, 17–18 exemplify the intricate variety of classical Hebrew (69).

It would be exciting indeed if Polak’s linguistic spectrum unequivocally matched a parallel spectrum in thematic orientation in the narratives of Judges, enabling us to reconstruct a redaction history. Unfortunately, such matches are not consistently found. Edward Greenstein (2002) suggests that a variety of factors, including the anthropological, the discursive, and the psychoanalytical, have to be considered in order to explore the complex connections between language and culture. In Judges, certain seeming divergences from “classical” style may mark the narrative and stylistic choices of authors who use particular registers to capture certain kinds of content. Nevertheless, Polak offers important descriptive tools with which to explore the textural aspects of Judges. He suggests, for example, that his linguistically based

spectrum of Hebrew is related to the spectrum between the oral and the written. The classical form, he theorizes, is closer to spoken language, and the late form, the product of a scribal elite. Although Polak's suggestions for a chronological development from oral to written (1998: 60) are problematical, he does attune readers to variations in register, some of which are more oral-traditional than others.

Poetry and prose, oral and written

It is axiomatic to many biblical scholars in search of Israelite epics that such works were originally poetic and orally composed, even if only hints of these qualities remain visible in the corpus of the Hebrew Bible (see, e.g., Cross 1973: 112–13). As James Kugel has noted, however, the line between “poetry” and “prose” is often blurry in Israelite literature (1981: 76–95). Particular cultures will have their own registers of specialized language, quite apart from what a contemporary person might recognize as poetry or prose in English literature. Even within single epics, multiple genres and variations in linguistic style and register are possible (Honko 1998: 27). Thus Judges 5, the Song of Deborah, is characterized by a particular kind of language. Lines are parallel in content and consistent in length, while the language is formulaic and densely repetitive, and refrains are common. Nevertheless, large portions of the narratives of Judges, which modern readers might consider prose, are also presented in highly stylized language. Formulas abound and images are repeated in the parallelistic style seen in more obviously “poetic” works. Thoughts, moreover, frequently are complete at the end of each line so that the tale can be presented in a series of self-contained lines, a trait of traditional-style literature described by Albert Lord (1960/2000: 54). But is this traditional style indicative of oral composition? The style is indicative of oral-style aesthetics and may be rooted in a tradition of extemporaneous oral composition of the kind studied by Lord (*ibid.*) and Parry (1971), whereby “singers of tales” build compositions by means of formulaic patterns in language and content. Writing was also available, however, at least to certain Israelites, even as the oral tradition flourished.

The very existence of the various writings of the Hebrew Bible in their traditional style serves as proof of the interplay between the oral and the written. Certain pieces may have been orally composed, whereas others may be imitative of oral style. Written works may have been performed orally, while oral works may have been written down by scribes or recreated from memory. Works that existed in writing could be recreated from memory without recourse to scrolls (see Carr: 160–2). Oral works can become quite fixed, a virtual “text,” while written works can display the qualities of performance with its variations (Nagy 1996: 69–70). There were, no doubt, oral and written versions of the narratives of Judges, and the relationship between the oral and the written is complex and not possible to unravel (Niditch 1996). While Honko (1998) suggests that “poetry” in our terms is not a necessary criterion of epic, Beissinger, Tylus, and Wofford indicate that neither is oral composition (1999: 2–3, 11–12). Questions of poetic style and oral composition are important considerations

in exploring Israelite epic-style works such as Judges, but one needs to resist the temptation to oversimplify.

Most scholars, previous and contemporary, agree that the Bible has important connections to oral literature and an oral culture. The argument made by Gunkel (1910) and Westermann (1984) is that oral versions of biblical narrations found their setting in an early, less sophisticated period in Israelite history. These cultural products were eventually written down in a later period, characterized by greater sophistication, literacy, and a lively scribal culture. This particular view of the nature of oral literatures and of the relationship between oral and written in Israelite tradition is misguided. Oral literature can be simple or complex and admits of various styles depending upon its function and setting in the culture, courtly or common, rural or urban, male or female audience. Modern students of early and oral literatures have shown that no sharp dichotomy exists between the oral and the written in traditional cultures, nor a simple one-way evolutionary development from orality to literacy, but rather a spectrum in which the oral and written coexist and influence the form and function of one another. Literacy in traditional cultures, moreover, is not to be confused with modern conceptions of literacy.

The writings of the Hebrew Bible reveal economy and repetition, the recurring patterns of language and content, more typical of the oral than the written. This is especially apparent in the book of Judges. There are many oral styles in a traditional culture, as seen in the Israelite case (Niditch 1996: 25–38), some more baroque, some more elegant, and so on. Various traditional styles are consistently at work in the book of Judges, even if questions concerning “origins” in oral composition are unanswerable. Stories of Judges, however, reveal a rich literature that was at home in a world dominated by oral-world assumptions about the workings of traditional narratives. In this oral world, writing was available as a means of composition and preservation. The stories told in Judges are but a fraction of the larger traditional fund – oral and written, archived or never put in writing, written and then lost, known and then partially or wholly forgotten – that must have existed in the first millennium BCE.

Context: On Dates, History, and Redaction

The work of American and European biblical scholars of the twentieth century expressed an understandable interest in matching the narratives of Joshua and Judges with actual historical origins of the Israelites in the land. The Bible itself seems to offer two versions. One, represented in Joshua (e.g., the summaries in Josh. 10:40–2, 11:23, 18:1, 24:8–13), suggests that Israelites swept into the land in an unbeatable military wave in which all enemies fell before Joshua and the Israelites, portrayed as a unified, successful commando force, aided by the divine warrior and assorted miracles. The other version, well represented in the middle chapters of Joshua (e.g., 13:1–7, 15:63, 16:10, 17:12) and throughout Judges, offers a more halting and disjunctive portrayal of the Israelites’ early presence in the land, describing

successes and failures in establishing themselves. Judges includes both alternating periods of subjugation and subjugating and a more tribal accounting, as Israelite groups are seen in various geographic locations, north to south, living side by side with non-Israelite groups who have not been rooted out. What is one to make of such contrasting pictures?

Various models for Israelite origins have been offered, several of which are directly relevant to the study of Judges. The “infiltration model” articulated in the work of German scholars including Albrecht Alt (1966) and Martin Noth (1966) matches the non-triumphalist thread in Judges, also found in portions of Joshua, with a particular evolutionary view of civilization involving the gradual settlement of nomads to become agrarian villagers. Alt pointed to archaeological evidence suggesting that the central highlands of Israel were sparsely populated in the Late Bronze Age and available to these would-be settlers, and theorized that as the settlers increased in number, they found themselves in competition with other local groups and claimants to the land, fighting them for control. In this model, the battles described in Judges are viewed as a reflection of the Israelites’ defensive wars, for the infiltration had been gradual and non-aggressive, and Israelites defended themselves by unifying in a league or amphictyony, consisting of various segments or tribes of Israel. This model has come under criticism. While it appears to match Judges better than the triumphalist thread in Joshua, even Judges contains no description of peaceful infiltration, only scenes of what Alt would have to call subsequent tensions, and, of course, many of these tensions are among Israelites themselves, an important and revealing aspect of the book.

From American scholars of the mid-twentieth century such as W. F. Albright and his students, John Bright and G. Ernest Wright, emerged the “conquest model.” These scholars employed archaeological data to suggest confidently that Israelites did take over the land through sweeping military actions, as suggested by portions of the book of Joshua (e.g., the accounts in Josh. 1–9, 10:40–2, 11:23, 18, 24:8–13). For Wright (1946: 114), the linear conquest and halting takeover are not mutually exclusive; rather, portions of Joshua describe the Israelites’ initial rapid successes, while Judges describes later attempts to hold or consolidate power. Links between specific stories in Joshua and archaeological evidence of destruction and burning in biblically named locations of the appropriate era have proven elusive, although some threads in modern scholarship still attempt to match biblical accounts with the warring actions of certain ancient Israelite groups at specific locations (see the orientation offered in Mazar 1971).

In contrast to “infiltration” and “conquest” models, the “peasant revolution” model, first suggested by George Mendenhall (1973) and later developed more fully by Norman Gottwald (1979), suits one collection of biblical stories quite well, namely, the tales of Israelite “social bandits,” mentioned earlier: many accounts in Judges describe politically marginal, poorly armed guerrilla forces of Israelites combating well-equipped, king-led oppressors by means of trickery or banditry. The “liberation” or “peasant revolt” model holds that the Israelites engaged in a war of liberation to free themselves from various feudal overlords who reigned at least nominally as vassals of the superpower Egypt. In this way Gottwald and Mendenhall

link tales of Judges to certain aspects of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age socio-politics as reconstructed by historians.

The “pioneer settlement” model evidenced, for example, in the work of Robert Coote and Keith Whitelam (1987) regards Israelites as native to the land and does not rely at all on the biblical story to reconstruct Israelite origins (16, 19–20, 176–7). Referring instead to archaeological data and pertinent ethnographic models from other cultures, Coote and Whitelam hypothesize that Israelites were composed of elements that left the more settled urban lowland to deforest and tame the highlands. The movements of these pioneers were motivated by economic issues, especially the collapse of trade in the difficult times of the Late Bronze Era. Coote and Whitelam, however, resist matching their model to suggestions in Judges 5, for example, about banditry on the highways and economic deprivation that would seem to suit such a portrayal.

Lawrence Stager and others offer a more nuanced version of the “pioneer settlement” model, namely a “ruralization hypothesis.” Stager explores a confluence of economic, archaeological, and biblical data to explain the emergence of early Israel and “the proliferation of agricultural villages in frontier areas” within the framework of the “economic decline of the Late Bronze city-state” (1998: 141–2). Stager carefully suggests links between the process of ruralization and situations described in Judges. He finds a degree of historical verisimilitude, for example, in the reference to economic contractions in Judges 5:6–7, in the competition with the Philistines that dominates tales of Samson (the Philistines settled on the Mediterranean coast in the twelfth century BCE), and in the description of the Danites as employed in seafaring (Judg. 5:17; Stager 1986, 1989). Increasingly, scholars use the term “ethnogenesis” to describe the process by which a group self-identifying as the descendants of Israel might have emerged from the cultures of Canaan during this time of economic and political upheaval (Killebrew 2005: 13).

Other approaches to ancient Israel treat the question of Israelite history differently. Some regard the earliest period of Israelite history as impossible to reconstruct, suggesting that the Bible reflects a much later vision from the period of the monarchy or post-monarchy. An example of this approach to Judges is found in Marc Brettler’s study that postulates an exilic or post-exilic, pro-Davidic ideology behind the work (2002). Some scholars downplay historical questions or ignore them altogether, finding the meaning of a text in the reader’s response.

This range of approaches to Israelite history and literature relates well to the chapter by Jonas Grethlein (this volume) which deals in complex ways with the layers of historical meaning and message to be derived from such ancient tales. They may reflect events or situations in the past as well as revealing the life-setting of those who compose and shape the material. Such authors belong to periods much later than the one imagined or described. I take seriously the idea that Judges includes material that would have been meaningful in some form to Israelite audiences before there were kings in Israel (pre-tenth century BCE) during the Northern and Southern monarchies (tenth to sixth centuries BCE) and after the collapse of the Southern Kingdom (586 BCE). Judges is a multi-layered and multi-voiced series of narratives, rich in characterization, dramatic tensions, protagonists, and enemies.

In exploring how these narratives reflect various periods and settings and resonated in them, questions concerning implicit worldviews are critical. Is a particular political ethic at work, a view of war, a prevailing attitude to gender roles? Where do the tales stand in contrast with or in comparison to material in the larger biblical tradition? The answers to some of these questions begin to reveal certain trajectories in Israelite thought and to suggest hypotheses about the people who produced and received this tradition of narratives. Within Judges, three major voices are discernible: the epic-bardic voice, the voice of the theologian, and the voice of the humanist. These voices are characterized by considerable overlaying and intertwining as would be expected in a traditional corpus of literature that was made and remade many times orally and in writing.

The epic-bardic voice

The epic-bardic voice may be as old as the stories themselves and as old as Israel's origins in the latter part of the second millennium BCE. The world as pictured is richly comparable to the depiction of ancient classical epic worlds with long-haired warriors, the use of a prophetic *kledon* (whereby the future is divined from another person's overheard words), a character akin to Hercules, a story comparable to that of Iphigenia, a tale reminiscent of the rape of the Sabine women, and epic-style encounters of heroes in battle and in death. This list is not to suggest direct borrowing from Aegean cultures but rather to acknowledge that more than one epic tradition enlivened the ancient Mediterranean world, and that cross-fertilization between various traditions is to be expected.

In this trajectory of Judges, heroes supported by the divine helper, Yhwh, battle enemies, sometimes on their own as in the case of the rogue Samson, sometimes with the help of a band of warriors comparable to that of Robin Hood. Narrative interests include the distribution of booty, the workings of temporary charismatic leadership and a decentralized polity, and aspects of religious life that sometimes differ, for example, from portrayals in the book of Deuteronomy.

Judges 5, "The Song of Deborah," belongs to this trajectory and for reasons of texture, text, and context may date to the twelfth century BCE, a very early date. It speaks in a particular stylized register that may have been available to composers in early Israel. Most of the book of Judges, however, reflects the influence of later receivers, preservers, and transmitters of the early tales. One of the most important is the voice of the theologian.

The voice of the theologian

A second layer or voice in Judges is usually recognized among biblicists as that of "Deuteronomic" or "Deuteronomic" writers. The former term usually refers to the fifth book of the Bible and its qualities of language and theme, while the latter term more broadly refers to Deuteronomic-style biblical contributors who are

typically represented in the corpus that runs from Deuteronomy through 2 Kings and who are often regarded as responsible for the compilation of that corpus. An interesting and important history of scholarship has been devoted to the identity and compositional activities of these composers whose style and worldview share much with the book of Deuteronomy, and the debate about Deuteronomistic writers is lively in current scholarship.¹⁰ For our purposes, a brief description of what I will call the “voice of the theologian” will do.

Strongly covenantal in orientation, the voice of the theologian regards Israel’s history as dependent upon the relationship with Yhwh. Faithfulness brings success, military, economic, and political, whereas unfaithfulness and covenant-breaking brings defeat and oppression. Successes and failures in war – and the Book of Judges is primarily a collection of war stories – are viewed strictly in terms of Israel’s covenant faithfulness, in contrast to other explanations of failure such as inferior weapons or inexperience. The intellectual ancestors of the Deuteronomic-style writers of the Hebrew Bible are probably to be found in conservative Levitical northern circles such as those that supported the prophetic careers of Elijah and Elisha. Such groups, many of whose members headed southward after the conquest by the Assyrians (721 BCE), may have influenced the reform of the seventh-century BCE king Josiah, who is said to have reinvigorated the covenant with God, eschewing all idolatry and prohibiting other practices which would have been rejected as non-Yahwistic (2 Kgs 22–3).

The language of Judges 2 and other recurring frameworks that set the history of the judges and individual tales about them in a theological framework (3:7–15, 4:1–3, 6:1–10, 10:6–16, 13:1) are, as noted above, reminiscent of the style and content of the book of Deuteronomy, the classic statement of Deuteronomic thought. These strong covenantal frameworks, however, also serve to preserve fascinating descriptions of precisely the sort of popular religious practices that Deuteronomists are supposed to have rejected. They briefly condemn Gideon’s ephod, an apparent iconic object associated with divination, even though other non-Deuteronomic features of religious practice are presented without commentary or negative evaluation. The sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter, for example, is narrated without condemnation. The voice of the theologian in Judges is less dominant and intrusive than is often asserted (Amit 1999: 363–7), and its appreciation for the old stories is irrepressible. Like Deuteronomy 17, the book of Judges is also critical and suspicious of kings (ibid.: 114–18). Writers of a Deuteronomistic orientation appear to have been particularly influential during the late Southern monarchy and the early exilic period. One might imagine their stamp to have been set on traditions of the judges during the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, but earlier or later dates are possible.

The voice of the humanist

A third voice, most prominently represented in Judges 1 and 17–21, can be detected in the work of those who preserve the ancient stories. Telling tales of “olden times,” this voice is non-critical about the ancient protagonists. It lets the tales speak for

themselves. Perhaps contributors to this third voice or layer regarded their compositions as works of fiction written in a traditional mode, designed to put a spin on early history. Or perhaps the authors regarded themselves as preservers of ancient history. In either case, they preserved and shaped tales that purport to tell about ancient times. Many of these stories may have circulated among Israelites in various forms for centuries before the formation of the book of Judges. One does not mean to suggest that the stories in any form were necessarily true representations of the earliest Israelite culture or religion, but rather that they had validity as one way in which Israel viewed itself even in early times.

Material in chapters 1 and 17–21, including tales of conquest, rape, and civil war, is formally different from the stories of the individual judges in Judges 3–16, which are introduced by a recurring, covenantally oriented frame. Judges 3–16, moreover, explores Israel's early history by tracing the careers of heroic and charismatic individuals. As go their adventures and victories, so goes the nation. Judges 1 and 17–21, however, provide foundation tales that tend not to feature heroic individuals. The voice that dominates is aware of tensions in the Israelite worldview and lets the tradition as framed reveal them. We are allowed to see two options in polity: one centralized and one decentralized, one state-led, the other kin-based and tribal. The view of Israel's conquest of the land is ambivalent and contrasts with the portrayal found in portions of Joshua that project uncomplicated self-assurance. The voice of this trajectory is particularly attuned to the vagaries of power, the transience of political and military control, themes that emerge strongly in the introductory first chapter and the foundation tales of the last five. Messages about the ways in which power comes and goes are, of course, thematically important in many epic traditions and make for powerful stories about heroic human beings. The third voice of Judges embraces and intensifies such messages. I call this measured and thoughtful contributor the "humanist" voice whose worldview is congruent with those of some Persian or early Hellenistic period biblical writers.

Despite the limited and edited nature of the preserved corpus, biblical works from the late sixth to fourth centuries BCE reveal a wide array of genres and points of view. Proto-apocalyptic works such as Zechariah 14, Joel, and Isaiah 24–7 co-exist with writings such as Ezra and Nehemiah, which reflect a sober "collaboration with tyranny," to use a phrase of David Daube (1965). Tales of simple things and people with a positive view of foreigners, such as Ruth, coexist with Esther, a tale of people in high places who survive by using their wisdom to manipulate unwise and evil courtly foreigners. God stands in the distance in the book of Ruth but is nowhere mentioned in Esther. Pious wisdom works such as Proverbs coexist with radical works such as Job and Ecclesiastes that question God's justice. Much has been written about the sources of these works and the differences in worldview that they reflect. The social realities are, no doubt, much more complex than Paul Hanson (1975) or Morton Smith's two-party maps (1971) allow. The former suggests "visionary" and "pragmatist" parties, while the latter offers a contrast between "Yahweh-aloners" and "assimilationists." Smith does, however, offer observations germane to suggesting a final Persian-Hellenistic layer in Judges. He writes of

“belletristic material” stemming from “lay circles enjoying wealth, leisure, and considerable culture” who are “in touch with intellectual and artistic developments of the Hellenistic world” (120). They are responsible in his view for the finest stories of the late biblical or early post-biblical period, such as Ruth, Jonah, Esther, and Judith.

The writers who are responsible for Judges 1 and 17–21, and ultimately for the preservation of the rest of Judges with the tales of the heroes framed by the theologian, are able to imagine a time without kings. Like the voice of Deuteronomy 17 and the theologian’s voice that frames the central tales of the judges, the humanist voice suggests that the monarchy is inevitable if not always glorious. This voice is responsible for the significant refrain in the last five chapters of Judges, “In those days there were no kings in Israel,” and thereby appears to be recalling a long-ago past. In portions dominated by the voice of the humanist, human beings are largely on their own, although God is always in the background, the ultimate controller of events. This voice is nationalistic and interested in showing that Israelites can reconcile even after the worst civil war. It describes a world without temple or priesthood in which individuals exercise leadership when needed and appreciates the epic world, perhaps influenced by comparable Greek traditions. I suggest that a post-exilic writer or writers has appreciatively preserved and shaped the inherited traditions of Judges, with a light hand. This voice is heard best at the beginning and end of Judges, and, like the rest of the book, preserves older material. Tales of chapters 1 and 17–21, however, were not previously collected and shaped by the “theologian.”

Conclusions

My approach to epic and history in Judges finds its place in contemporary approaches to biblical historiography among the work of scholars such as Peter Machinist (1994) and Ronald Hendel (2001). Both allow that historical information may be preserved in the ancient texts, but both also emphasize the ways in which biblical literature preserves a complex history of worldviews. Influenced by Jan Assman, Hendel is also concerned not just “with the past as such but with the past as it is remembered” (602 nn. 7–8). Hendel explores “the social context and functions of history” and the ways in which “cultural discourse about the remembered past . . . serves to inform and influence the cultural present.” “Cultural present” can thus refer to the social worlds of the various writers who shaped and reshaped tales of the judge heroes. Similarly, Peter Machinist explores what tales about the past reveal about Israelite self-perception and self-definition in particular periods; tales of the Israelites set in the period of the judges and portrayals of the enemies they face are critical to the formation of Israelite identity. Such stories may not be

reliable history in the sense of a documentary account, though authentic information bearing on the events they depict may well be preserved in them. But they have great historical value in their function as ethnic and cultural boundary markers, asserting for their respective authors that there really is an “us” over against a “them,” (1994: 51)

Israelite literature does preserve epic-like traditions in tales of the judges and early kings. The texture of the material has implications for appreciating Israelite ethnic genres and for the ways in which one approaches poetry, formulaicity, and orality. The connections between this literature and Israelite history are complex. The approach here offered explores history in terms of the worldviews that inform layers in Judges. The redaction of Judges with its implicit history of attitudes suggests important links between Israelite “epic” and history, but not necessarily neat correspondences between narration and actual events. Historical information may be gleaned about the worlds of the preservers of the literature, earlier and later, but with small adaptations in content and framework, the same stories can reflect and shape the cultural identity and “collective memory” of Israelites living in various periods of time.

Notes

- 1 Expanded portions of this chapter are found in Niditch 2008: 1–26.
- 2 Judg. 6:12; 1 Sam. 14:52, 16:18; 2 Sam. 17:10, 23:20, 24:9.
- 3 See Beniah (2 Sam. 23:20–1; 1 Chron. 11:23); Elhanan (2 Sam. 21:19); David and Goliath (1 Sam. 17); Ehud (Judg. 3:12–30); Shamgar (Judg. 3:31); Samson (Judg. 14:6; 15:15).
- 4 Gen. 8:6, 41:1; Deut. 9:11; Judg. 11:39; 2 Sam. 15:7; 1 Kgs 2:39.
- 5 Num. 17:23; Judg. 9:42, 21:4; 1 Sam. 11:11, 18:10, 31:8.
- 6 Judg. 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 20:27–8, 21:25, and in 1 Sam. 3:1, 28:1; Septuagint 1 Sam. 4:1.
- 7 Examples include Judg. 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 20:27, 28; 1 Sam. 28:1; Septuagint 1 Sam. 4:1.
- 8 Judg. 13:2, 17:1, 19:1; 1 Sam. 1:1, 9:1; 2 Sam. 21:20 (1 Chron. 20:6).
- 9 See, e.g., Japhet 1968; Hurvitz 1982, 1998; Rendsburg 2002; Polzin 1976, and Polak 1998.
- 10 See, e.g., the collections of articles in Knoppers and McConville 2000; Römer 2000; and Shearing and McKenzie 1999.

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No Contest between Memory and Invention: The Invention of the Pāṇḍava Heroes of the *Mahābhārata*

JAMES L. FITZGERALD

This paper offers an hypothesis about the *Mahābhārata*'s being a creative response to particular historic developments and a model for political action. But first I introduce the *Mahābhārata* in terms of the questions posed by the editors of this volume.

The *Mahābhārata* as Epic

The Mahābhārata tradition, in general

What needs to be said immediately is that the word *Mahābhārata* refers first to a multi-media narrative tradition rather than a text. A written Sanskrit text of a “*Mahā-*” *Bhārata* emerged from this tradition sometime between 200 BCE and 400 CE, but that Sanskrit text is not *the Mahābhārata*. The written Sanskrit text and its manuscript traditions are certainly the most important resources we have for the comprehensive study of the narrative epic tradition called *Mahābhārata*, but the broader oral narrative and performative traditions of the *Bhārata* from which the written Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* tradition emerged continued to flourish beside the written Sanskrit text and do so to this day. The fact that the modern north Indian name of the country India is “Bharat” is one indication of the enduring vitality of the complex of meanings in which this epic was woven.

The ancient Bhārata

The word *Bhārata* is an adjective deriving from the name of an ancient Aryan tribe (the Bharatas) known in the earliest Vedic literature.¹ At some point in Vedic or

post-Vedic times this adjective came also to refer to some form of an oral narrative about a great war of the Bharatas. There is slender direct evidence of such a tradition by about 400 or 300 BCE, evidence that we put together with the antecedent oral tradition that is clearly evident in the written Sanskrit text of the *Mahābhārata* to posit the existence of this *Bhārata* in the middle of the first millennium BCE and, in all likelihood, earlier. This *Bhārata* eventually developed into something called the “Mahā-” *Bhārata*, the “big”, the “great”, the “all-comprehending,” or “universal” *Bhārata*. This *Great Bhārata* developed from the *Bhārata* – likely during the latter half of the first millennium BCE – and it is this particular product of the oral *Bhārata* tradition that was written down in epic Sanskrit at some point. When this expansion of the *Bhārata* occurred and when it was committed to writing are both matters for which we have no direct evidence. We have firm testimonial evidence of its existing fully grown in the early sixth century CE; all we know of its history prior to that is a matter of inference from comparisons of the written text to what we know of its context.

The Mahābhārata as heroic epic

Turning now to the thematic nature of the *Mahābhārata* (hereafter usually abbreviated *MBh*) tradition, I suspect strongly that the putative oral *Bhārata* was a heroic epic set into a dualistic, eschatological narrative frame, as Dumézil (1968: I, esp. 208–57) and Wikander (on his contributions, see *ibid.* 42ff.) have suggested – perhaps a sort of Ragnarök scenario.² And while the *Bhārata* may have never been simply “heroic epic” in the stirringly clear way that C. M. Bowra defines it (1952: 1–3), in all likelihood it served as a setting for some of the praise literature (*dānastuti-s*, “encomia for generous gifts,” and *naraśaṃsi-s*, “songs praising men”) we see in the ancient Vedic texts and the narratives of the exploits of chieftains and armies that naturally grow out of that literature (Brockington 1998: 5; Horsch 1966; Sieg 1902).

But whatever the exact nature and shape of the putative old *Bhārata*, the fully developed received text of the *MBh* of the first half of the first millennium CE tells an apocalyptically theological story of mythologized heroes (Fitzgerald 2004b). The received text of the written Sanskrit epic was a mytho-heroic religious epic, and as such Bowra excluded it from consideration in his *Heroic Poetry*. But, for all this – and here I am grateful to Richard Martin’s brilliant essay on “Epic as Genre” (2005) – the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* definitely is the written text of an “epic.” That is to say, it was – to paraphrase different passages in Martin’s essay (2005: 15–18) – an expansive super-genre that inhered in its performers, and which has a greater presence in its unlimited potential to be and contain everything than in its actual performances. The *MBh* grew out of an all-encompassing, publicly related narrative aimed at the whole of a society, incorporated other genres of art and communication besides its central narrative, and addressed a wide range of abiding and fundamental concerns of the society.

One aspect of the *MBh* tradition considered as *epos* in this way, is the fact that while the ancient heroic narratives were intimately related to the chiefs and warriors who were featured in them – one class of ancient Indian narrators, *sūtas*, were the chariot drivers of great warriors³ – the epic narratives were conveyed in performance before the whole public and thus became a kind of public record with at least some degree of independence of the chiefs and warriors. Epic discourse is never the simple, straightforward discourse of the rulers themselves, even if it is often about them and sometimes, even often, subject to their influence. Epic constitutes the first form of the fourth estate.

Text-forms and text-elites in first millennium BCE India: Indian epic in the context of ancient Indian text-production

There is another major textual tradition of ancient India that has a bearing on the Indian epic tradition in fundamental ways: it is a rival tradition of divine-worship poetry that defined an earlier expansive super-genre that inhered in its performers.⁴ The editors of this volume asked us to call the category of *epos* into question and ask whether patterns relevant to epics apply to other genres as well. Their suggestion finds a ready candidate in India at the dawn of the first millennium BCE. I refer to the large corpus of orally composed and orally transmitted fixed texts called the Vedas, at the temporal base and aesthetic acme of which is the collection of divine-worship poetry known as the *R̥g Veda*. At some point in time the *R̥g Veda* became an orally fixed collection of the texts of over 1,000 of these worship-poems. The *R̥g Veda* was transmitted as a unit from generation to generation by a remarkable series of mnemonic devices that reduced the text for its carriers to a series of approximately 400,000 syllables (van Nooten and Holland 1994). In the train of this *R̥g Veda* came a whole sequence of ancillary ritual texts composed across the first five or six hundred years of the first millennium BCE, as the Aryan migrants into northern India gradually moved out of the Indus valley and south and east into the valley of the Gaṅgā, and further south and east across the whole of northern India (Witzel 1997). This very extensive system of knowledge (the Sanskrit noun *veda* means “knowledge”) was the product of brahmin poetic and narrative skills and ritual imagination. The production, mnemonic maintenance, and ritual use of this knowledge distinguished and defined the most concerted intellectual stratum of ancient Indian society, the Aryan brahmins, for a millennium and more. The men who possessed and used this knowledge did so in concert with the chieftains of their tribes, defining over time a symbiotic relationship between those who wielded physical power and those who wielded verbal power (Kulke and Rothermund 1998). It would be hard to overstate the importance of this remarkable tradition and the remarkable elite it defined in the intellectual, social, and political history of India.

The History around the *Mahābhārata*

Glimpses of history in the Vedic canon

The tradition of Veda is important for the study of Indian epic in another way. According to the Vedic scholar Michael Witzel, the Vedic canon is a succession of reliably fixed texts, a series of never altered “tape recordings” (his metaphor) that each reflect the historical moment and place of their composition. Witzel has arranged this canon of texts diachronically and diatopically and studied all of them with a keen eye for every possible variation of language and subject matter (Witzel 1997). He has charted the eastward movement of the Vedic Aryans, a movement running parallel to the passage of time; movement from the five tributary rivers of the great Indus in the northwest, across the boundary area between the Indus and Gaṅgā watersheds that came to be known as Kurukṣetra (the “Field or Land of the Kurus”), into the north Indian Mesopotamia between the Yamunā and the Gaṅgā rivers, into the eastern reaches of this Doab, this “Two-rivers” area or “mesopotamia,”⁵ and down the Gaṅgā valley to Magadha⁶ where, by the fifth and fourth centuries BCE the polities were becoming powerful, centralized kingdoms, and where, in 345, a significant empire arose at Pāṭaliputra, modern Patna, in Magadha.

In the phase of Indian history following the composition of the poetry of the *Rg Veda*, c. 800 BCE, these texts attest to the rise of a significant kingdom of a tribe of Kurus in Kurukṣetra.⁷ The Kurus became the paramount rulers of the Aryans under a king Parikṣit, and they styled themselves after the ancient Bharatas. The Kurus were opposed to and sometimes confederated with the large Pañcāla tribe, who straddled the Gaṅgā river, downriver to the south and east of the Kurus (Witzel 1995). At some point in time the *Bhārata* epic likely had the Kurus and the Pañcālas on the two sides of its belligerent juxtaposition.

According to Witzel (1995: 14), the historical Kurus initiated the specific structures and forms of the Vedic canon as we have it today. “In order to carry out [a number of] religious and social reforms . . . [and] to achieve the general purpose of overlordship in northern India . . . [they] initiated a collection of the major poetic and ritual texts.”

But Kuru hegemony did not last forever. Later Vedic texts refer to a non-Aryan group known as the Salvās driving the Kurus out of Kurukṣetra (Witzel 2005: 31, 40, 49). When this defeat of the Kurus occurred is not known. Witzel reads in the texts an expansion of Pañcāla power in the wake of this event, a possibility that is quite plausible. There are later Vedic text references to the Salvās Aryanizing and in later Indian literature, including the *MBh*, they were known principally as the Śūrasenas. The ancient Kurus, the descendants of the great king Parikṣit, are referred to as *passés* by the late Vedic *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* (3.31).

Besides invaluable information about the social and political *realia* of ancient north India in the first millennium BCE, the Vedic texts also contain numerous disparate references to the kinds of dramatic events and many of the personages seen as

well in the *Great Bhārata*. Reading these texts in a strenuous effort to recover actual history, Witzel believes he can see in the references to a great “battle of ten kings” at *R̥g Veda* 7.18 and 7.33 an eyewitness account (by the priest-poet composing the hymn) of an actual battle – a battle which is the historical basis of the *Bhārata* and *Mahābhārata*. In the Vedic account, an ancient Bharata king Sudās won a great victory, with the help of his brahmin priest Vasiṣṭha. He was, at the time, surrounded by an array of ten allied kings led by his rival from the Pūru clan on the bank of the River Paruṣṇī in the central Punjab (Witzel 2005: 21).⁸ Witzel discerns developments in the ancient accounts of this great battle in other and later texts of the Vedic canon and then in the *MBh*.

During the post *R̥gvedic* period, a gradual change can be mapped closely, of the locations and personalities involved: from the Paruṣṇī in Panjab to the Sarasvatī in Kurukṣetra [a couple hundred miles to the south and east – JLF]; from the Bharata chieftain Sudās and his opponent the Pūru chieftain Trasadasyu, to Yudhiṣṭhira of the Pāṇḍava and Duryodhana of the Kaurava [these last the two kings in whose name the great war of our written Sanskrit epic goes forward – JLF]. However, even the latest Vedic texts do not yet reach the exact situation as depicted in the *Mahābhārata* (Witzel 2005: 21–2).

According to Witzel, the series of different versions of these events found in the temporally and geographically dispersed fixed Vedic texts reflect actual variations of historical memory which would have been constantly effaced in bardic texts.

[T]he RV text could not be changed, and was transmitted as a sort of tape recording (with a few Nixonian edits). The change found in post *R̥gvedic* texts therefore must reflect a lively and changing popular and bardic tradition that existed already in Vedic times, though mostly outside the ritual texts. . . . This non-ritual oral tradition (the “original Purāṇa”) evolved, just like any bardic text (such as the *MBh*) without the strictures of Vedic recitation and its rigorous oral transmission (Witzel 2005: 25).

The main difference between . . . epic texts and Vedic texts is the constant updating seen in bardic texts, while the Vedic ones, once composed, could not be changed. The various Vedic texts, composed over at least half a millennium, thus provide important insights about how the popular tradition of the great battle, frozen in time by the Veda, developed through the centuries before the . . . earliest strata of the *MBh* (Witzel 2005: 49).

The general historical setting of the Mahābhārata

Against this first millennium BCE background, I turn now to the *MBh* and its general historical setting. A variety of inferences regarding the text’s knowledge or ignorance of different *realia* such as particular ethnic groups, Roman coins, or copper-plate land-grants allow us to say that, for the most part, most of the text we have in the written Sanskrit *MBh* certainly existed by 200 CE. Another set of inferences has led myself and others to look to the dramatic political and cultural

transformations of the fourth and third centuries BCE for the context that would make the majority of the epic most meaningful. The critical events of this period are the rise to prominence of the anti-Brahminic Jain and Buddhist religions (about 400 BCE), the creation (in 345 BCE) of a mighty empire in eastern India (the Nandas in Magadha) that was not solicitous of ancient brahmin prerogatives,⁹ the incursion of Alexander into India in 327 BCE and the formation (about 320) of the even more powerful and extensive Mauryan empire in the east in the wake of Alexander's withdrawal, this empire's fostering and patronizing the anti-Brahminic religions while simultaneously patronizing brahmins as just one more religious elite (rather than deferring to brahmin prerogatives), the enlarging of this empire by the great Aśoka Maurya about 260 BCE, Aśoka's further "insults" to brahmin dignity in his many imperial edicts, and, finally, the overthrow of the Mauryans by a brahmin general in 185 BCE and his replacing the Mauryans with a dynasty of brahmin kings. Collateral with the breakdown of imperial Mauryan power in the east was a new push of Bactrian Greek power into northwest India, followed by central Asian Śakas (kinsmen of the Scythians). In the northwestern quadrant of the Indian sub-continent these non-Indian rulers competed among themselves and with already resident Indian rulers to the south and east; they set up a long-lasting series of non-native ruled kingdoms. In time they were challenged and then succeeded by the central Asian Kuṣāṇas, who eventually held an empire stretching from the central Gaṅgā valley of India into the Sinkiang province of western China in the middle of the second century CE. Native rulers of India sensitive to the ancient brahmin elite prevailed in the east (the Śuṅgas, Kāṇvas, and Cedis) and across a south-central band of the sub-continent (the Śātavāhanas). In the fourth century CE native rulers regained control of most of northern India under the imperial Guptas, a brahmin-sensitive dynasty which patterned some of its basic political ideology after some of the late teachings of the *Mahābhārata*. Only in peripheral or oblique ways are these political, social, and cultural developments explicitly reflected in the *Mahābhārata*, but they are in fact reflected there, and if the *Mahābhārata* is read sensitively against the backdrop of this history, some of its central features gain an unaccustomed clarity. Let me stress, however, the essentially speculative nature of this interpretive enterprise.¹⁰

I believe that the germ of the radical transformation of the putative *Bhārata* into what became the *Mahābhārata* occurred sometime in the century following the rise of the unacceptable Nandas to imperial power in Pāṭaliputra in 345 BCE. This new story may have taken inspiration and energy from the invasion of Alexander a couple of decades later and/or from the consolidation of power at Pāṭaliputra by the subsequent unacceptable imperial power, the Mauryans, about 320 BCE, in the wake of the allied Indian response to Alexander's invasion. The "germ" of the new *Bhārata* was the recasting of the old *Bhārata* with the new Pāṇḍava heroes, a "war-party" of the gods born high up in the Himālayas, who descend into the *Bhārata* heartland, take up a place in the Bharata-Kuru dynasty, and conquer the old Bharatas through an alliance with their old rivals, the Pañcālas ("Pāñcālas" in the *MBh*). Whenever it was exactly that the Pāṇḍava theme germinated and became intertwined with the old *Bhārata*, it certainly grew and matured in the decades during and after Aśoka

Maurya's rule,¹¹ and may well have contributed to the brahmin general Puṣyamitra Śuṅga's killing and overthrow of Bṛhadratha Maurya in 185 BCE. The transformed *Bhārata*, the putative new *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata*, continued to develop under the sponsorship of the brahmin Śuṅgas and their brahmin Kāṇva successors in north-central and northeastern India. The commitment of the new *Bhārata* to writing and its becoming the *Great Bhārata* may have occurred under these rulers concerned to reassert a Brahminic vision of polity and society, or one or both of these accomplishments may have been the work of Śātavāhana kings¹² or even their eastern counterparts the Cedis of Kalinga (Orissa, in the far southeastern corner of northern India), perhaps even the great Cedi king Khāravela, in the middle of the first century BCE.¹³ Though Khāravela was himself a devotee of Jainism, there are other indicators that make it worthwhile to consider his or a clansman's possible role in sponsoring the *Mahābhārata*.¹⁴

The first century BCE also witnessed a tremendous surge of cultural creativity in north India centered in the Bharata heartland around Mathurā, which was poised at the frontier of the influences coming from the foreign-ruled kingdoms of the Greeks and others in the west and the indigenous kingdoms to the east and south. This creative mixture reached its zenith as the central Asian Kuṣāṇas occupied the old India areas in the Doab and the Panjab as part of their imperial arc reaching westward around the Himālayas into China. The latest developments of the written text of the Sanskrit *MBh*, including its "appendix," the *Harivaṁśa*, a purāṇa centered upon Kṛṣṇa, likely occurred in the Kuṣāṇa era and its immediate aftermath, with the all-India written Sanskrit text of the epic leading up to the ideology of the Guptas and being promulgated by them 200 to 300 years later under the Guptas (320–497 CE; see Malinar 1996: 435–54).

The commitment of the great Bhārata to writing

Before pursuing the great transformation of the *Bhārata* into the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* let me say a little more about the production of the *Mahābhārata* text. Though much work has been done, *Mahābhārata* scholarship still has a great deal of work ahead of it to study systematically the language and composition of the Sanskrit text. The work of Pavel Grintser and Vassilkov and others has done the basic job of identifying many of the oral formulas that persist in the written text of the *Mahābhārata*, pointing definitively to its roots in oral poetry (Brockington 1998: 82ff.; 1999; regarding the work of Grintser and Vassilkov, see Brockington 1998: 78–9). How and when some version of the *Bhārata* or *Great Bhārata* epic was developed in written form remains a very difficult question. It must have occurred after Aśoka Maurya's use of writing for his famous carved edicts in the middle decades of the third century BCE; this was the first known use of writing in the Indian sub-continent (apart from the undeciphered writing of the Harappan civilization). It may well have been contemporaneous with the commitment of elements of the Buddhist canon to writing in Śrī Laṅkā in the first century BCE (for this last see von Hinüber 1988: 41). The basic commitment of a *Bhārata* text to writing occurred

before the norms for the composition of classical Sanskrit narrative had developed fully. Our text of the *MBh* exhibits forms of both meter and language that fall outside the standard of Sanskrit as it came to be written from the second century CE onward. The first century BCE time-frame would correspond well to the likely time-frame for the development of the transformed *Bhārata* I just postulated.

One major scholar of the *MBh*, Alf Hiltebeitel, has argued that an *atelier* of epic poets working under the guidance of a chief architect for a period of a few years (two generations at most, he says) created the *MBh* in a single *literary* effort. Arguing like intelligent design theorists in another anti-evolutionary arena, Hiltebeitel denies there was ever an oral *Bhārata* epic. He charges that oral epic theory is a large house of cards in relation to the *MBh*, and he claims that the few references we have in adjacent Sanskrit literature to a “*Bhārata*” as opposed to a “*Great Bhārata*” are of no significance.¹⁵ What Hiltebeitel gains by viewing the *MBh* in this way is a completely synchronous artistic creation (or one that is nearly so; he admits the possibility of a few additions to the text after its composition) that is the product of some kind of unified authorial vision. Hiltebeitel says that the archetypal text recovered in the Pune edition was produced in writing between “the mid-second century BC and the year zero” (Hiltebeitel 2001: 18). Hiltebeitel’s argument that the text was created in a single synchronous creative effort is, in my judgment, completely unsupportable, even paradoxical, but it has a helpful, clarifying effect on thinking about the *Mahābhārata*’s development. On the other hand, I have no trouble imagining such an atelier producing a written *Great Bhārata* on and around some older oral *Bhārata*.

The *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata*

The grafting of the Pāṇḍavas into the old Bhārata

Perhaps the single most striking fact about the *MBh* when viewed against the historical bits and pieces about it that we can glean from Vedic literature is the complete absence from that long record of any mention of the central protagonists of our *MBh*, the five Pāṇḍavas, and the three critical “*kṛṣṇa*”¹⁶ figures attendant upon them: their obscure grandfather and advisor, Kṛṣṇa Vyāsa; their affecting wife Kṛṣṇā Draupadī; and their cousin, ally, and advisor Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva.¹⁷ The narrative of the received *MBh* text came into being as a radical transformation of the eschatologically framed war of the Bharata-Kurus against the Pāṇḍavas. The Pāṇḍavas were grafted into the Bharata lineage with great effort and ingenuity: they are (physically) the divine sons of an (effectively impotent) Bharata scion, himself the result of a levirate impregnation by a brahmin ascetic from the distaff side of the royal family (Kṛṣṇa Vyāsa, their grandmother’s premarital son by an ancient seer of the Vedas); the Pāṇḍavas are effectively intruders who descend upon the Bharata court – with seers vouching for their identity – from high up in the mountains (where they were born to Pāṇḍu Bharata, who had left his glorious kingship to wander the wilderness); they are a polyandrous quintet of brothers married to the Pāṇḍālī princess Kṛṣṇā

Draupadī; they are thus outsiders (or, more precisely, outsiders become insiders who were then driven outside again after losing a wager); and, in terms of the great war at the center of the inherited narrative, they reverse the polarity of the heroes and villains (from the good Bharata-Kurus vs. their enemies, the Pañcālas, to the other way around: the Pāṇḍava–Pāñcāla alliance vs. the villainous Kauravas); and the Pāṇḍavas fight with unscrupulously crooked methods (*jihmopāyas*).¹⁸ The reversed polarity of the belligerents sets up a number of intriguing sub-plots: for example, because the Pāṇḍavas are fighting against their own family-seat, there is a repeated parricidal tension – at times even an “oedipal” tension – in the violence in addition to its fratricidal antagonism.

The Pāṇḍava-Bhārata narrative

As Michael Witzel suggests, the group of the Pāṇḍavas were patterned on the unruly bands of *vrātyas* known in Vedic literature who did, at times, raid and extort cattle from neighboring realms.¹⁹ But the Pāṇḍavas were not just a small mob; in addition to their individual divine paternities, the quintet of the Pāṇḍavas was fashioned as a composite representation of the ancient Vedic god Indra, virile warrior-god of the fertile rains, whose principal Vedic myth involves his slaying the water-encircling dragon called “Encircler” (Vṛtra), often with wondrous assistance from the brahmin Bṛhaspati or Viṣṇu. The Bharata Kauravas were identified as antagonists of the “Pāṇḍava Indra” and the story of their rivalry and warfare can be broadly mapped against some accounts of the battle between Indra and Vṛtra.²⁰ The surface of the main narrative revolves around Yudhiṣṭhira Pāṇḍava’s undertaking world conquest with its consequent universal ratification of his status as universal ruler in the Vedic Rājasūya sacrifice. But his quest falls into chaos because of his inability in a game of dice and, after first losing everything to his Bharata cousins, Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers are let off easily with a period of exile followed by a year of incognito life. Yudhiṣṭhira’s quest is put back on track when he fights his way back to the kingship with victory in the great war against the resistant Bharatas. The back and forth contention of the Pāṇḍavas and Kuru-Bharatas in the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* corresponds broadly to the ebb and flow of Indra’s sometimes desperate struggles against Vṛtra. One of the mightiest of the Kaurava warriors, Karna,²¹ is explicitly associated with the desiccating Vṛtra at the time Arjuna Pāṇḍava (physical son of the Rain-god Indra) kills him on the battlefield. Of course the side of Indra and the gods wins and the eldest of the Pāṇḍava brothers, Yudhiṣṭhira, completes his quest to become universal king and rules the Bharata kingdom in a gloomy twilight that lasts until the end of the epic tale when the Pāṇḍavas walk up the mountains into heaven.

In the story as we now have it, this narrative obviously has a deeper purpose, for it is couched in apocalyptic terms: its most powerful agents are disguised and its hidden argument is labeled “the secret of the Gods.” The Pāṇḍavas, the five sons of a man named “Pale,” “Bright,” “White” (Pāṇḍu), are the overt agents of this

defeat of the Bharata Kauravas; they represent Indra in action, aided by three figures of covert brahmin or divine power, three *kṛṣṇa* agents, whose assistance is unpredictable and sometimes paradoxical. Their grandfather and advisor Kṛṣṇa Vyāsa, their *kṣatriya* ally and advisor prince Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, and, new to the mix (when compared to Vedic versions of the theme), Kṛṣṇā Draupadī, the princess of the Pāṇcālas, an incarnation of the goddess Śrī (the consort, in Indian mythological history, first of Indra, later of Viṣṇu), who also motivates and advises them at crucial junctures of the narrative. All three of these figures are labeled “*kṛṣṇa*,” which I think is best understood as “dark, obscure, shadowy, mysterious,” for all three of them are powerful agencies operating behind the “overt,” the “white, bright” agents, the Pāṇḍavas. This chiaroscuro quality of the story, the continuous waxing and waning of the Pāṇḍavas, mimics not only the struggle between Indra and Vṛtra, but also the alternation of the moon between brilliance and occultation.²² This theme is probably the reason the epic traces the Bharata dynasty’s origins back to the moon. Of course self-conscious development of the idea of covert political action is directly relevant to the situation in which the Pāṇḍava transformation of the *Bhārata* occurred and is obviously intrinsically germane to the theme of epic literature as intervention in history.

The argument of the Pāṇḍava-Bhārata

What purpose might the authors of this transformation of the *Bhārata* have had in mind? Do the Pāṇḍavas represent the inclusion in epic of a previously unknown group of people? Do they represent a group that actually conquered the Kurus with the help of the Pāṇcālas? Are they a complete poetic invention created by a narrative genius? Or might they represent some combination of all these possibilities, a fictionalization or imaginative re-presentation of actual historical agents? Is there any sense we can make of the Pāṇḍava transformation of the *Bhārata* by reading it against any social, cultural, or political aspects of the historical situation in northern India?

There is not sufficient time or space to build a complete and systematic argument to answer these questions definitively. What can be done is to lay out the basic framework of an hypothesis that may serve such arguments on another occasion. There are two significant arguments proposing historical identifications of the Pāṇḍavas, one from Michael Witzel and another from Asko Parpola, and I will review these briefly at the end. But the most fundamental fact is that the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata*, the old *Bhārata* recast with the Pāṇḍava heroes, seems first and foremost a symbolic construction addressing certain elements of its socio-political, cultural context. The Pāṇḍavas of the *Great Bhārata* epic may well have been conceived after the historical example of some band of intruders who barged into the old Bharata-Kuru polity and took it over in alliance with the Pāṇcālas. But as important as that history may have been at the time of its occurrence, the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata*, as a work of art, seems to have fashioned its memory of these events for some more

complicated purpose than the glorification of these putative ancient interlopers. The *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* is making certain points about polity and kingship that would have been salient for the brahmin intellectual and priestly elite of north-central India in the wake of the dramatic successes in the east of Buddhism and Jainism and imperial politics that did not yield unique pride of place to the *brahman* (that is, the Vedas) and the *brāhmaṇas* (that is the brahmin elite) in the fourth century BCE. There is much to learn by identifying elements of the *Great Bhārata* and examining what point each may have been making within the general historical context. Whatever the results of such examination may be, there was much more on the minds of the authors of the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* than the straightforward glorification of a particular leader, tribe, or dynasty.

Although the *Pāṇḍava Bhārata* tells a story of civil war become global war in the ancient Bharata heartland and never makes overt reference to the specific historical situation of northern India in the late first millennium BCE,²³ much in the transformed *Bhārata* can be construed as a Mauryan or late Mauryan-era argument. It was an argument constructed by some visionary brahmins who had ceased composing new texts of the Veda and who had interjected themselves into the process of *Bhārata*-making-and-dissemination (perhaps at pilgrimage centers relatively removed from the powers of the Mauryan rulers).²⁴ Their basic argument was that the armed stratum of society, the mythic ancient *kṣātra*, represented in their new epic as an empty shell of the once glorious Kuru-Bharatas, required regeneration by brahmin intervention and divine assistance. What these visionary brahmins were referring to, in the historical actuality of northern India in the century 300–200 BCE, was the fact that formerly glorious *kṣatriya* kings and chiefs in and around the ancient Kuru heartland lay supine as vassals of the impious eastern hegemon, the Mauryan ruler. In all likelihood, these old ruling families of the heartland also followed the lead of their eastern masters in directing significant amounts of material support to the Buddhist and Jain orders of monks, thus posing a threat to brahmins that was economical as well as political and cultural. The Bharatas in the ancient seat at Hāstinapura, sometimes depicted as spent and decrepit in the *Great Bhārata*, were, as tools of the eastern hegemon, well represented in the epic narrative as the encircling Vṛtra and his brood, bottling up and extinguishing the life of the captive subjects of the ancient, once-glorious Bharata kingdom. But, in a veiled reference to the actual historical situation of the fourth and third centuries BCE, the Pāṇḍavas did need to dispose of the evil emperor Jarāsaṃdha in the east, before the purgative “civil war” of the Pāṇḍavas against the Bharata Kauravas went forward.²⁵

The paradigm for the epic’s plot is contained in what is presented as an ancient historical account of the first great good king on earth, Pṛthu. This history was told to Yudhiṣṭhira Pāṇḍava when he inquired about the basis of kingly authority as he was about to begin ruling the *Bhārata* kingdom after prevailing in the great war. Pṛthu was created by a group of brahmins who killed the wicked king Vena and fashioned the body of a new king, Pṛthu, from the corpse of Vena. After bringing Pṛthu into being from Vena’s body, the brahmins instructed Pṛthu to rule well by restraining himself and consulting with them on all matters (see *MBh* 12.59). This

history is one of the supplements surrounding the Pāṇḍava narrative in the “*Great Bhārata*”; it stands at the head of numerous instructions on kingship and other matters that are passed on to the new universal king Yudhiṣṭhira from, ultimately, brahmin authorities. These instructions laid the normative foundation for Brahminically orthodox kingship for ever after.

Placing the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* in History

The basic narrative of the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* arguing this regeneration of the *ṣatra* may have developed in the immediate wake of Aśoka Maurya’s rather cosmopolitan pronouncements, that is, sometime after 250 BCE. Many of Aśoka’s pronouncements would certainly have brought home to any brahmins sensitive to the issue the fact that brahmin authority and priority in the society and the polity had been eliminated by a ruler who had usurped brahmin priority (see Fitzgerald 2004a: 100ff., 114ff.). But it is also possible that the idea of the Pāṇḍava purge of the *ṣatra* may have sprung up at any point after about 300 BCE (or even earlier, depending upon the projection of eastern power into the central kingdoms in the decades before and after the rise of the Nandas in 345 BCE; see Brockington 2002: 83–4) and developed gradually in oral traditions for a century or more. There is, however, one critical aspect of the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* that seems to aim specifically at a refutation of Aśoka Maurya and which must have been fashioned sometime after Aśoka’s conquest of Kalinga and the [thirteenth] rock edict he issued discussing it and its violence (see Fitzgerald 2004a: 117, where it is mislabeled as the “Twelfth Major Rock Edict”), probably even after his death. I am referring to the protracted debate over the ethics of kingship initiated by Yudhiṣṭhira Pāṇḍava after the war: Yudhiṣṭhira refused to accept the justification for the violence that brought his victory, rejected his newly won universal kingship, and had to be persuaded that such violence was a necessary and good part of proper kingship. Yudhiṣṭhira’s delicacy of conscience and the consequent parsing of the need for kingly violence demonstrated the proper way for a king to become “free from grief” (that is, “*a-śoka*”) in the wake of justifiable royal violence, in contrast to the false ways of the so-called “Aśoka” Maurya (his conversion to Buddhism and his superficial claim of forswearing royal violence).

It may well be that this Pāṇḍava parable and/or the instructions in proper kingly violence presented to Yudhiṣṭhira, provided an imaginative template for the actions of the brahmin general Puṣyamitra Śuṅga in killing the Mauryan emperor Bṛhadratha in 185 BCE and instituting a polity built upon the principle of brahmin hierarchy. One of the points of the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* was to rouse *ṣatriyas* to militant resistance to the impious eastern hegemony as well as to argue the ancient symbiosis of *ṣatriya* rule and brahmin guidance. Some critical aspects of this argument were no doubt composed and promulgated in the 40 years or so between the death of Aśoka about 230 BCE and Puṣyamitra’s revolution, but it is not likely that the entire transformation occurred in those four decades and it is highly unlikely that the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* had yet become the full *Great Bhārata* by 185 BCE.

Broader Historical Considerations: From the *Bhārata* to the *Great Bhārata* via the Pāṇḍavas

I close with brief points regarding historical possibilities at each extreme of my argument here: the possible historicity of the Pāṇḍavas at the early end and, at the point the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* was promulgated as part of the *Greater Bhārata* (if not our final received text), the ideological and symbolic value of a parallel story that redactors used to frame and “color” their *Great Bhārata*.

Who were the Pāṇḍavas really?

Michael Witzel believes the Pāṇḍavas represent the entrance into the bardic record of the group called the Salvās who expelled the Kurus from Kurukṣetra at some unknown date in the middle of the first millennium BCE (Witzel 2005: 34 n. 60, 40 n. 65, 68). This possibility is highly plausible as the possible factual germ behind the Pāṇḍava construction and the Pāṇḍava assault upon the Kurus. But we know very little of the Salvās, and, as I have just suggested, the Pāṇḍavas of the *MBh* represent much more than a band of conquering barbarians. Also, as Witzel himself points out, the Salvās, who are known to the *MBh* under a couple of different names, are distinguished in the *MBh* from the Pāṇḍavas (2005: 34 n. 60).

Less plausibly, Asko Parpola argues a bigger form of this kind of thesis. Parpola thinks the “Pāṇḍavas” are one reflection of “groups of Iranian-speaking, pastoralist and marauding horsemen [who] started arriving from the steppes of Eurasia and Central Asia in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India” from 800 BCE onwards (2002: 370). Those entering India, who were “pale,” he points out, established themselves in Gujarat and spread from there into the central Deccan, South India, and Śrī Laṅkā, and they eventually gathered such a force that one group, the Pāṇḍavas, took over the rule even in the mightiest kingdom of north India. Another successful group was the family to which the Buddha belonged: the Śākya, too, were Pāṇḍus, ultimately of Śaka (Scythian, Iranian) origin, as their name reveals. In north India, the Pāṇḍus quickly adopted the earlier local culture and language. Their newly won positions were legitimated with fabricated genealogies that made them a branch of the earlier ruling family, and with the performance of royal rituals. The propaganda was disseminated by professional bards, leading to the creation of the *Mahābhārata*.

The alliance of the Pāṇḍavas with the Yādava chief Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva during the *Mahābhārata* wars led to the birth of a new Vaiṣṇava religion, at the center of which was at first a trio that succeeded another with Vedic and older Indo-European roots (the Aśvins and their sister [Dawn]): two heroic brothers (the “strong” white elder brother Arjuna/Baladeva and the black younger brother Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva) and their sister, whom the elder brother marries (Parpola 2002: 370).

Parpola also suggests that there is some evidence that some people associated with these Śakas in Iran were polyandrous. Parpola’s thesis is more elaborate than Witzel’s,

but it sheds just as little light on what we actually see in the *MBh* as does Witzel's suggestion. Even as regards polyandry, it is of little force. For while the Pāṇḍavas themselves are depicted as polyandrous, they hardly represent a polyandrous society. The primary importance of the Pāṇḍavas' "paleness" is symbolic, though that does not exclude the possibility of there having been some actual "pale-faces" in the history behind the poetry. Much of the widespread occurrence of forms of the name Paṇḍu and Pāṇḍya that Parpola points to in the Indian historical record might be explained more easily as the result of the spread of a powerful Pāṇḍava legend legitimizing Brahminic kingship.

Witzel's suggestion has the virtue that it is based on evidence that explicitly pertains to the Kurus and Kurukṣetra. But nonetheless, when compared to what the creators of the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* have presented in their reformed epic, the most that historical memory furnished them was a precedent for the overthrow of the Kurus. As significant as that may have been in fact, there was no contest between memory and invention in the imaginations of the poets who refashioned the *Bhārata* into the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata*.

A thematic parallel pointing to another historical context

In addition to the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata*'s portrayal of the Pāṇḍava correction of corrupted Bharata rule through the great war at Kurukṣetra, the *Great Bhārata* strategically frames the telling of the Pāṇḍava narrative with several renditions of the story of the brahmin Rāma Jāmadagnya's killing all the *kṣatriyas* of the world repeatedly (as a vendetta for *kṣatriyas* capriciously killing his father), occasioning the repeated regeneration of *kṣatriyas* from the seed of brahmins planted in the wombs of the surviving *kṣatriya* women. Framing and coloring the *MBh* with this story of insatiable brahmin rage and repeated brahmin regeneration of the *kṣatra* reinforces and generalizes the indictment of the *kṣatra* made in the Pāṇḍava narrative and stresses the point of the Pṛthu paradigm, that kingship and its necessary violence are properly vested in proper *kṣatriyas*, even if brahmins must occasionally take the violent rectification of matters into their own hands.

But the Rāma Jāmadagnya tale does more than justify violent brahmin political intervention; the full accounts of Rāma's actions stress that his deeds are highly problematic when viewed in a long-term perspective. (He is a brahmin whose inner nature was confused before birth, when his mother accidentally drank a magical potion intended to produce a paradigmatically mighty and ferocious *kṣatriya*. His bloody deeds are lamented by his ancestors, who ultimately force him to cease and desist his bloody campaigns against *kṣatriyas*. He is exiled by a brahmin patriarch because his vendetta against *kṣatriyas* had left the earth without a proper, i.e., *kṣatriya*, king.) Whatever was the original context that inspired the story of Rāma Jāmadagnya, one of the implications of this history is its underscoring the point made to Yudhiṣṭhira after the war, that the violence of kingship is a matter for *kṣatriyas* and not for brahmins. One possible and important historical bearing of this point lies in the fact

that Puṣyamitra Śuṅga was a brahmin, and the dynasty he founded was ruled by brahmins, as was the dynasty that succeeded the Śuṅgas at Pāṭaliputra, the Kāṇvas. Given the emphasis of the eastern Cedis and Khāravēla upon their being *kṣatriyas*, the Rāma tale might, in fact, be being used here to acknowledge the historical role of brahmins in recent Indian history and to “correct” it.

This possibility becomes more intriguing if we consider the *MBh*’s (fundamentally contradictory) geographic localizations of Rāma. The Rāma Jāmādagnya history stems from the southwestern “corner” of northern India (Malwa, see Gail 1977 and Fitzgerald 2002) and we are told at *MBh* 12.49.59 that Rāma was exiled to Śūrpāraka on the western coast of India (between the nineteenth and twentieth parallels of northern latitude; southwest of Malwa and a little less than 200 miles from the Śātavāhana capital Pratiṣṭhāna, Paithan, to the east). But the *MBh* also sets a critically important scene (*MBh* 3.116–17) at Rāma’s wilderness retreat (*āśrama*, where, it seems, he lives in retirement), which it locates at “Great-Indra” Mountain (or in the “Great-Indra” mountains) in Kaliṅga, on the east coast of India (and these stretch from the seventeenth to the twentieth parallels of northern latitude). In this area that had been famously and brutally annexed by Aśoka about 260 BCE, Rāma receives, welcomes, and honors Yudhiṣṭhira Pāṇḍava and his brothers in what must, under the circumstances, be interpreted as Rāma’s “passing the baton,” that is the commission or charge to police the *kṣatra* with violence (*MBh* 3.117.16–18). In virtually every other appearance in the *MBh*, the brahmin sage Rāma Jāmādagnya is implacably hostile to *kṣatriyas*. A line drawn from Śūrpāraka on the west coast to Rāma’s retreat at Mount Mahendra in Kaliṅga runs about 800 miles through the Śātavāhana and eastern Cedi realms, major “southern” kingdoms in the two centuries between 100 BCE and 100 CE. Further indicating some significance for this political line, the *MBh*’s account of the Pāṇḍavas’ clockwise tour of India’s holy places during their 12 years of exile offers a brief, cursory passage of a mere 18 stanzas to describe the whole of their pilgrimage of southern peninsular India below this line – down the east coast then up the western. The accounts of their visits to sites above this line – in both the east and the west – take up many dozens of chapters of the third book of the *MBh*. Though it is certainly the case that the contents of the *MBh* show that the provenance of most of its elements lie in the north (from the Doab through much of the Gaṅgā valley down to Magadha and Aṅga in the east; see Hopkins 1898: 21–2), it may well be that the native southern kingdoms of the post-Mauryan era had a great deal to do with the commitment of the new *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* to writing, perhaps a critical stage in the evolution of the old *Bhārata* to the *Great Bhārata*.

Notes

- 1 An eponymous ruler Bharata is later invented and inserted into the *Mahābhārata*’s curious heroic genealogy that distinguished a lunar dynasty of kings, whose members are at the center of the *MBh* narrative, and a solar dynasty of kings, whose members are at the center of the other major epic of ancient India, the *Rāmāyaṇa*. On Vedic literature, see below.

- 2 Ragnarök is the Scandinavian story of the “Doom of the Gods” told in the Icelandic *Völuspá* and *Snorri Sturluson’s Prose Edda*, wherein the dyadic war of the gods and giants ends in a destruction of the world, after which the world regenerates.
 - 3 See Brockington 1998: 18ff. Sharma’s (2000) valuable discussion of the status of ancient Indian narrators is not convincing in trying to distinguish *sūta* “charioteer” from *sūta* “bard” (229 and passim), a distinction which is not necessary for his interesting thesis.
 - 4 Once again, I use Martin’s terms.
 - 5 As opposed to the “Five-rivers” area of the “Panjab.”
 - 6 For a valuable new discussion of the cultural issues involved in this geographic procession see Bronkhorst 2007.
 - 7 See Witzel 1995: 8: “The most important political result of the reform carried out by the dynasty of Parikṣit was the formation of the Kuru tribe and the permanent establishment of the Bhārata-Kuru chiefdom. The formation of the Kuru state and the establishment of its new socio-religious basis is a lasting feature of the Vedic period, and not a transient one like that of the Pūru or Bharata realms in Rgvedic times.” See too Witzel 2005: 24–5.
 - 8 The Paruṣṇī is located in Pakistan today and known as the Ravi.
 - 9 In later Brahminic literature the first Nanda was labeled “destroyer of *kṣatriyas*”; see Mookerji 1951: 32 and Kulke and Rothermund 1998: 56. “*Kṣatriya*” is the Brahminic label for an armed ruler who accepts the Brahminic hierarchy. Not only were the Nandas themselves not “*kṣatriyas*,” by their projection of power to the west they made the former *kṣatriyas* of the Doab and elsewhere into “*kṣatriya-bandhus*,” “merely nominal *kṣatriyas*.” Another way to represent the political argument of the *MBh* is as a brahmin attempt to find or make armed rulers who accept the Brahminic hierarchy (*varnadharma*, the behavioral norms of the four *varṇas*).
 - 10 Malinar 1996: ch. 8, “Zur Datierung der Bhagavadgītā,” advances a richly detailed and interesting discussion of these general issues; it does so by way of a close examination of many points and issues pertinent to the *Bhagavad Gītā* and its arguments in this historical context.
 - 11 268–233 BCE are the dates accepted by Kulke and Rothermund 1998: 62.
 - 12 Though some later Brahminic sources label them *vr̥ṣala*, which is understood primarily to designate a *śūdra*, a non-Aryan not eligible for Vedic rites, the eminent epigraphist and historian D. C. Sircar states (1951: 196–7) that the term could also refer to “a Hinduised or Aryanised foreigner or non-Aryan.”
 - 13 I take this somewhat later date for Khāravela from Kulke and Rothermund 1998: 95 and Sircar 1951: 215–16.
 - 14 I list here a cluster of intriguing features of the Cedis and Khāravela; some of these matters will be touched upon in the final section of this paper.
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- 1 The importance of Kaliṅga in Mauryan history and its symbolic importance in the *MBh* (site of Rāma Jāmadagnya’s retirement and his commissioning Yudhiṣṭhira to discipline the wayward *kṣatra* [see the last section]).
 - 2 The identification of the Cedis with Indra as the divinity representative of the epic’s argument for *kṣatriya* rule under brahmin guidance; one of their styles was Meghavāhana, “Cloud-rider,” which refers to Indra, as too their more grandiose styling Mahāmeghavāhana, equivalent of Mahendra, “Great Indra,” which was also the name of the coastal mountain-range of Kaliṅga where Rāma Jāmadagnya was located. (Viṣṇu later supplanted Indra in this symbolic role and the later Guptas aligned themselves with Viṣṇu and his “incarnate descents” into terrestrial affairs [*avatāra-s*].)

- 3 The Cedis may well have argued the inappropriateness of brahmin rulers against the brahmin Kānvas who had succeeded the brahmin Śuṅgas as paramount rulers in the native kingdoms of northern India (see the final section).
 - 4 Khāravela's great self-consciousness as a successor of Nandan and Mauryan emperors.
 - 5 Certain Cedis (particularly Vasu Uparicara and Śiśupāla) played symbolically and artistically critical roles in the *MBh* (see Brockington 2002: 85). Even though Śiśupāla was depicted as a bitter rival of the Bharatas and of his maternal cousin Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva (the principal ally of the Pāṇḍavas), the glory of the Cedis is enhanced by his enmity toward Kṛṣṇa, his protracted provocation of Kṛṣṇa, and his spectacular execution by Kṛṣṇa. As we have it now, this scene is one of the most highly elaborated scenes in the entire *MBh* and in glorifying Kṛṣṇa it also glorifies the Cedi Śiśupāla. (Devotion to God by opposing God [*vairabhakti*] is a recognized theme of medieval Hindu theology.)
 - 6 The *MBh*'s elaborate justification of royal violence would have served a devoted Jain ruler like Khāravela well, who asserted military power vigorously in spite of his devotion to the non-violent religion of Jainism.
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- 15 For a discussion of Hildebeitel's main arguments, see Fitzgerald 2003.
 - 16 The word *kṛṣṇa* signifies "black, dark" and is used in the epic in the more extended sense of "obscure, hidden, covert."
 - 17 Readers who wish to know more about the intricate narrative of the received text of the *MBh* may consult my relatively detailed recapitulation of it in the encyclopedic essay "*Mahābhārata*" (Fitzgerald 2004b). The historical discrepancy I point out here was much discussed by nineteenth-century scholars (see Weber 1878: 136; Hopkins 1889: 59ff.; Holtzmann 1892–5: 11–14) who were handicapped by having only vulgate editions of the text and even less adequate chronologies than we have today; also, nineteenth-century scholars often read the text either unsympathetically or too literally.
 - 18 Different versions of the "inversion" theory were debated at length by various authors pointed to in the last note. My historical focus on the epic's history is quite different from that of these earlier scholars, though clearly I think the "inversionists" were on the right track.
 - 19 "... unmarried young men, usually Veda students, who roamed the countryside and wilderness in the study-free months, and put pressure on householders to supply them with cattle as a 'start-capital' for later, married life. They had an elected leader, dressed and spoke in peculiar ways, and followed a number of strange customs, among others gambling with 150 dice in a *sabdhā*, in a salt depression in the wilderness; they were followed by common, promiscuous women" (Witzel 2005: 40–1).
 - 20 Such as the "The Victory of Indra Episode" told at *MBh* 5.9–18.
 - 21 Karṇa is also the son of a god, Sūrya, the sun, and related to the Pāṇḍavas as the secret and abandoned first-born son of their mother.
 - 22 The cycles of the moon were sometimes understood as the moon's filling up with, or being drained of, Soma juice, which is another form of the life-giving waters Indra brings when he wins his annual war with the sun.
 - 23 Though we know certainly that the received text is post-Buddhist, neither the Buddha nor the Buddhists are ever mentioned by name – *silentium clamat*.
 - 24 The wilderness retreat (*āśrama*) of the brahmin seer Rāma Jāmadagnya at Mahendra mountain in Kalinga (Orissa) is described at *MBh* 3.115–17 when the Pāṇḍavas visit him there. Though normally implacably hostile to *kṣatriyas*, Rāma welcomes Yudhiṣṭhira and

his brothers there and honors Yudhiṣṭhira – an ideologically significant gesture discussed below. This pilgrimage center in a locale that had been annexed by Aśoka Maurya with brutal violence about 260 BCE may well depict the sort of place from which was propagated a politically subversive version of an old epic. See the second segment of Part IV below for further discussion of the political significance of this locale and this incident.

- 25 Before Yudhiṣṭhira could launch the Rājasūya ritual demonstrating his universal sovereignty to all lands he had to conquer the entire world; and before he could launch that effort he had to remove the eastern hegemon, Jarāsaṃdha. See *MBh* 2.18–22 and Brockington 2002.

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From “Imperishable Glory” to History: The *Iliad* and the Trojan War*

JONAS GRETHLEIN

Compared to most scholars who focus on ancient cultures, Hellenists can deem themselves fortunate. They have the full texts of two epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Although there are other archaic poems written in hexameters such as Hesiod’s *Theogony* and *Works and Days* and the Homeric Hymns, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are the only fully preserved instances of what must have been a large corpus of heroic epic poetry.¹ The use of these poems as historical evidence has proven tricky, however. There are no other Greek texts from that time which allow us to check the Homeric evidence. Any attempts to link the Homeric poems to history must therefore rely primarily on archaeology, Near Eastern sources, anthropology, or literature from later periods.

Another point that makes the historical interpretation of the Homeric poems a challenge is the uncertainty about their date of composition. The majority of scholars date the *Iliad* either in the second half of the eighth century or in the first half of the seventh century² and the *Odyssey* somewhat later. However, there are still voices that advocate a date as early as the ninth century, while others argue that the epics were fixed after the seventh century.³ The dating is closely linked to the controversy surrounding the mode of composition. Since Parry’s seminal works (1971), no one would deny that the texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* mark the end of an oral tradition. However, the so-called Unitarians and Neo-Analysts, most of whom are located in Germany, rather emphasize the role of writing and refer to one or two ingenious poets who composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*,⁴ whereas American scholarship puts much more emphasis on orality.⁵

The lack of a secure date for the Homeric epics and the fact that there is only scant evidence with which they may be compared easily leads to circular arguments: material remains are drawn upon to make sense of the epics and are, inversely, highlighted by the textual evidence (cf. Grethlein 2006a: 165–6). Despite this situation,

or perhaps because of it, the use of the Homeric epics as historical testimony has attracted much attention in classical scholarship. Philologists, historians, and archaeologists have all tackled this subject, and their simultaneous interest has inspired many heated debates.

In what follows, I will occasionally refer to the *Odyssey*, but my primary focus will be on the *Iliad*, since its account of the Trojan War is particularly relevant for relating the epics to history. In a first step, I will consider “The *Iliad* and History.” On the one hand, I will enquire whether or not the *Iliad* testifies to a historical war; in more abstract terms, I will consider the *Iliad*’s reliability as a *Quelle* (source) which Droysen defines as a written document, the primary goal of which is to preserve an account of the past.⁶ On the other hand, I will approach the *Iliad* as *Überrest* (remains) which, according to Droysen, signifies material that has not been arranged with the intention of providing later times with a source. This means that I will ask to what degree the time of composition has been inscribed into the *Iliad*. The second section of this chapter will be devoted to “The *Iliad* as History.” Texts not only mirror, or rather, refract the world in which they were written, but they are also part of history. What circumstances led to the rise of Greek epic and what was the original function of texts that would later become the core of Greek identity? Finally, I will suggest an approach that has not received much attention so far, but is one that I believe will at least stimulate questions worth considering: “History in the *Iliad*.” The heroes frequently refer to the past and bards even recount past events. An examination of the heroes’ memory could shed new light on epic poetry as an act of memory.

The *Iliad* and History

The Iliad as a “source” (Quelle)

Throughout Greek history, the Trojan War figured as a prominent point of reference (Erskine 2001; Pallantza 2005). The conflict between Greeks and Trojans was invoked in different media as a foil for the Persian Wars.⁷ Alexander the Great even appears to have styled himself as another Achilles.⁸ Not even Thucydides, hailed as the father of critical historiography, doubted the historicity of the Trojan War.⁹ What is more, the Greeks identified some ruins as the old city of Troy. It is doubtful whether Xerxes actually visited the remnants of Troy on his expedition to Greece, but Herodotus’s account of such a visit reveals that there was a place that was identified as Troy.¹⁰

The *Iliad* also inspired its modern readers to look for the remains of Priam’s palace. There were a few early expeditions, but it is Schliemann’s name that is usually associated with the “discovery” of Troy.¹¹ When he excavated the first walls at Hisarlik in 1870, he was convinced that he had found the place that Agamemnon and his men had besieged for ten years. With his enthusiasm, Schliemann reached beyond the world of scholarship and enchanted the broader public. And yet, some classicists did not conceal their doubts.¹²

The twentieth century saw divergent assessments that ranged from an enthusiastic belief in Schliemann's discovery to utter skepticism.¹³ It was in Germany that the smouldering debate finally erupted at the beginning of the twenty-first century.¹⁴ The "new battle of Troy" not only engaged philologists, historians, and archaeologists in an emotionally heated controversy but even reached the daily press (Cobet and Gehrke 2002: 290 n. 5). New excavations in Hisarlik under the direction of Manfred Korfmann, the latter's thesis that the city had been a major center of trade in the Mycenaean Age, and a few contemporaneous Hittite documents that seem to mention Troy and Greeks, prompted Joachim Latacz, an eminent Homerist, to argue eloquently for a renewed link between the Bronze Age remains at Hisarlik and the *Iliad*.¹⁵ According to Latacz, the correspondences between the results of Korfmann's excavations and the description of Troy in the *Iliad* compel us to take the epic poem at face value, that is, to read it as a source for an actual war. While this thesis dominated press reports and found approval among several archaeologists, a great number of philologists and historians continue to disagree.¹⁶

The modern German version of a "Trojan War"¹⁷ is an interesting test case that reveals the hermeneutical difficulties of proving the epic's historical testimony by relying mostly on archaeological evidence. Following Korfmann's interpretation of the archaeological record, Latacz (2004, 2005) believes that Troy VI used to be a mighty trading-post that lost much of its significance due to the recent transition to the use of iron instead of bronze and was in addition weakened by an earthquake. In Latacz's reconstruction, the Achaean Empire that is mentioned in contemporary Egyptian and Hittite sources took advantage of this situation and captured Troy (VIIa). He suggests that this event is at the core of the *Iliad*. That the *Iliad* was not recorded in written form until the second half of the eighth century, 450 years after the destruction of Troy VIIa, means that this account must have relied on a continuous oral tradition. Latacz assumes that the hexameter and the formulaic epic language had the effect of a strait-jacket, preserving knowledge of the actual event.

At this point, it is helpful to distinguish between two different steps: first, the interpretation of archaeological evidence and second, the attempt to connect this evidence to the *Iliad*.¹⁸ As is well known, archaeology does not establish objective data; its evidence is always understood within a particular horizon and is thus subject to interpretation. Korfmann and Latacz, however, insist on the objectivity of archaeological data while at the same time promoting a rather slanted interpretation. To begin with, the thesis that Troy was a major trading port not only rests on shaky ground but it also runs the risk of falsely projecting modern notions of trade onto an archaic system based on the exchange of goods (Hänsel 2003; Kolb 2003: 137–9; Cobet 2003: 34). The interpretation of Troy as an important city and port is supported by the desire to lend significance to the site and to facilitate connecting it to the *Iliad* (Cobet 2003: 20).

Moreover, the archaeological evidence does not necessarily indicate that Troy VII was destroyed by a single attack. While it is clear that the town was destroyed by fire, the cause of the fire is uncertain. The insignificant number of arrow heads recovered from the site has even led Dieter Hertel (2003a, b) to doubt that Troy VII was

captured at all; he thinks that destruction by a disastrous fire is more likely. Again, the “objective data” presented by Korfmann and Latacz turn out to be the outcome of a specific interpretation.

Even if we assume that Troy VII was destroyed by military force, there is still no evidence that the attackers were Greeks. In his argument, Latacz adopts the thesis that Wilusa, Taruisa, and Ahhiyawa, mentioned in Hittite documents, are identical with Ilios, Troy, and Achaeans. Yet neither are these identifications linguistically undisputed nor has a consensus been established about the geographical location of these places.¹⁹ Even if we agree with the chain of Latacz’s hypotheses, all we are left with is that the Hittites had contact with Troy and that Achaeans had some influence in the area. The only document that refers to both Wilusa and Ahhiyawa (and even this depends on how the text is restored!) says that there was a quarrel about the matter of Wilusa but does not mention an Achaean siege of Troy (Güterbock 1986: 37).

The “new Trojan War” thus reveals the danger of the circular interpretation of material remains and epic poetry. Even if the ruins of Hisarlik were already identified as Troy in the Archaic Age,²⁰ this does not prove the historicity of the war reported in the *Iliad*. It is generally difficult to link textual and archaeological evidence to each other, since each yields different kinds of insight, and it is even more difficult to confirm particular events by archaeological means (S. Allen 1999: 257; Sherratt 2005: 131–2, 140).

One further problem needs to be addressed. Is it possible that the *Iliad* transported historical knowledge over a span of 450 years without relying on the medium of writing? Literacy vanished with the fall of the Mycenaean palaces and did not emerge again until the eighth century (Powell 1991, 2002; Ruijgh 1995). According to Latacz (2005: 300–8), hexameter and formulaic speech allowed for reliable oral transmission. However, this argument rests on the assumption that the hexameter goes back to, or even antedates, the Mycenaean Age, an assumption that is not shared by all scholars (Fantuzzi 1984; Fantuzzi and Pretagostini 1996). If we ignore such doubts, several observations at first sight support Latacz’s thesis. Some words are undoubtedly of Mycenaean origin; some epic forms only scan metrically if we substitute the pre-Mycenaean or Mycenaean form (West 1988: 156–9 with examples), and some objects described in the epics, such as the boar’s tusk helmet or Nestor’s cup, closely resemble Mycenaean finds. However, upon closer inspection neither the linguistic nor the archaeological evidence allows us to conclude that the *Iliad* offers testimony to a historical event. The Mycenaean forms and words show that the *Iliad* draws on rather old linguistic elements, but this says nothing about content. It is striking, for example, that the boar’s tusk helmet is mentioned in a part of the *Iliad* that is considered particularly late. I will come back to this observation later.

It is highly questionable that an epic poem would be able to remain unchanged over such a long period of time. As studies of formulaic composition and performance have shown, hexameter and formulaic language are not so much a strait-jacket as a flexible system that makes every performance a kind of re-composition (Lord 1960/2000). Moreover, comparative evidence suggests that epic memory tends to distort history very substantially. At the core of the *Nibelungenlied*, for example,

are historical events such as a disastrous defeat of the Burgundians; yet the plot of the *Nibelungenlied* is a far cry from what we can reconstruct on the basis of other sources.²¹ Although it may be difficult to assess a particular case on the basis of comparative evidence,²² it is plausible that the general tendency toward distortion that is widely attested in oral traditions also applies to the *Iliad*. Latacz's thesis presupposes a high level of continuity throughout a turbulent period that includes the breakdown of the Mycenaean culture, the "Dark Ages," and the "Greek Renaissance" in the eighth century. All these ruptures and changes cast strong doubt on the possibility that an oral tradition preserved precise knowledge of a war that occurred in the Mycenaean Age (Raaflaub 1998: 397–8).

To sum up, we cannot rule out that the *Iliad* contains memories of an actual war, but the archaeological evidence does not suffice to link the *Iliadic* Trojan War to the Mycenaean remains at Hisarlik. At the same time, comparative evidence and the turbulent history preceding the *Iliad*'s composition undermine the possibility that a historical tradition could remain intact throughout centuries of transmission from the Mycenaean to the Archaic Age.

The Iliad as "remains" (Überrest)

What archaeological evidence does enable us to do is to elaborate on the value of the *Iliad* as *Überrest*. The Homeric world may not simply be a mirror of a historical society, but it gives us interesting insights into social and cultural history. Of course, this approach too has its limits. First, obviously but importantly, the archaeological record provides us with only a limited range of data and illuminates only certain aspects of reality.²³ Yet these aspects are central, including "good evidence not only for settlements, sanctuaries and architecture, for burial, warfare and for the exchange of non-perishable goods, but also, if more speculatively, for social organisation and the distribution of wealth and power" (Osborne 2004: 216). Second, the danger of falling prey to circular interpretations of the textual and archaeological evidence, pointed out earlier, applies here as well. It is quite difficult to determine where relics and epics corroborate each other's evidence and where one misinterpretation merely supports another misinterpretation. Third, we ought to take into account the fact that the epics not only draw on and transform elements of reality, but also have an impact on it. Some of the parallels between the *Iliad* and the material record may be due not to epic reflection of contemporaneous reality but rather to an imitation of epic in material culture (Stein-Hölkeskamp 1989: 18–20).

For a long time, scholars believed that the *Iliad* mirrored the Mycenaean world.²⁴ Then M. I. Finley's groundbreaking study (1956) emphasized the gap between the Mycenaean and Archaic Ages. Relying on insights of social history and anthropology, Finley argued that the "World of Odysseus" reflected the tenth and ninth centuries. While the differences between Homeric society and what we know about the Mycenaean world have been supported by the decipherment of Linear B,²⁵ the new date proposed by Finley for "Homeric society" has not gained general acceptance.²⁶

Instead, many scholars see in the epics an amalgam of different layers that range from the Mycenaean to the Archaic Age.²⁷ Others point out that, by and large, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* mirror the time of their creation, the late eighth or early seventh century.²⁸ Raaflaub notes that the ruptures and inconsistencies that can be observed in the epics are an expression of the dynamic period in which the poems were composed.²⁹ In some cases, he adds, it is not so much the contemporary world, but rather the very recent past that we find in the epics (Raaflaub 1998: 181).

There certainly are elements in the epics that antedate the Archaic Age. However, as we will see, most of them belong to a specific category for which there is a more plausible explanation than the amalgam theory. Otherwise, the Homeric world rather corresponds to our reconstruction of the early Archaic Age. However, one point needs to be emphasized: although, or rather because, it is our goal to assess the value of the epics as a historical source, we must take into account the power of poetic imagination (van Wees 1992; Hellmann 2000). Literature taps into the real world, but it transforms its elements and structures in more or less complex ways.³⁰ Most obviously, epic poetry displays a tendency toward aggrandizement and embellishment.

Let me flesh out these reflections. The decipherment of Linear B revealed that such epic words as *temenos* and *anax* are of Mycenaean origin. At the same time, the excavation of Bronze Age palaces has made it clear that the Homeric kings are separated from the Mycenaean kings by a wide gulf. While Mycenaean palace culture reminds us of Near Eastern monarchies, the heroes who are under great pressure to prove their excellence and status share a resemblance to the aristocrats we find in archaic Greek poetry (Stein-Hölkeskamp 1989). Moreover, recent studies of the epics have elaborated on the prominence of the polis, which parallels the developments of the early Archaic Age.³¹ The towns described in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* may not be fully developed poleis, as for example Fritz Gschnitzer believes (1981: 42; 1991), but they are already “spatially institutionalised” and the assemblies of the heroes mark the first step toward political institutionalization.³²

At first sight, the political geography of the epics evokes the Mycenaean Age. In the “Catalogue of Ships,” such Mycenaean centers as Mycenae and Pylos figure prominently, while there is little mention of Greek settlements in Asia Minor.³³ However, this does not necessarily imply an actual memory of the Mycenaean Age. On the contrary, the borders of Mycenae and Pylos that we can reconstruct on the basis of Linear B tablets do not correspond with the descriptions in Homer (Heubeck 1979a). Moreover, Kullmann has shown that there are strong correspondences between the “Catalogue of Ships” and Greece of the seventh century (Kullmann 1993; see also Eder 2003), and the idea of a large-scale Greek alliance fits much better with the political world of the early Archaic Age and its development toward panhellenism (Kullmann 1995: 62–5; Raaflaub 1998: 402; Sherrat 2005: 135). Giovannini (1969) even points out striking correspondences between the “Catalogue of Ships” and itineraries that were used to announce events such as the Pythian Games in the Archaic Age.³⁴ Thus, the prominence of Mycenaean centers in the *Iliad* does not indicate a long tradition that reaches as far back as the Bronze Age, but instead, as we will see, can be explained differently.

Warfare is at the core of the heroes' lives. In an influential book, Latacz (1977) demonstrated that epic battles strongly resemble what we know through other early Greek poetry about archaic fighting. Conversely, it has also been argued that archaic battles were imitations of the epic model (Crielaard 2002: 259–62). Several recent studies emphasize the role of the individual in epic warfare, which does not correspond to the phalanx-technique used at the time, but is best explained by poetic freedom and the wish to concentrate on the deeds of individual protagonists.³⁵ The creative activity of the bards, which is not bound to the reality of any particular point in time, may also be visible in the descriptions of the shields. Some are small and round, rather like shields used in the Archaic Age, while other passages imply large shields that cover the whole body, thereby evoking the shields found in Mycenaean paintings (H. Borchhardt 1977: 44–52). Such discrepancies used to be explained as references to different epochs. Hans van Wees, however, points out that the shield of the same warrior is described in both ways, as large and small; such shields do not therefore reflect real forms but poetic imagination, based on contemporary shields and embellishment (van Wees 1992: 17–21; see also Raaflaub 1998: 175–6).

Whereas the political, social, and military worlds of the *Iliad* strongly resemble the early Archaic Age, its material culture evokes the Mycenaean Age.³⁶ However, the material goods are by no means all Mycenaean; many epic objects such as belts (Brandenburg 1977: 142–3) are Archaic, and in other cases it is difficult to distinguish between Mycenaean and similar Archaic items. For example, greaves are attested both in the thirteenth/twelfth and the late seventh centuries. A particularly interesting case is the “silver-studded sword” (*phásganon argurōēlon*). Such swords are attested for the Mycenaean Age and the very formula can be found in Linear B tablets (Kirk 1960: 191, 198). Yet similar swords date to the eighth century (Foltiny 1980: 268–9, table XXIIIe) – which does not necessarily permit the conclusion that the *Iliad* refers to a contemporary object, since we must allow for the possibility that such eighth-century swords were formed after the epic model.

Yet there are several goods of undisputedly Mycenaean origin. The boar's tusk helmet owned by Meriones parallels our evidence of Mycenaean helmets (J. Borchhardt 1972: 79–81), and Nestor's cup, though not conforming exactly with archaeological finds, is strikingly similar to Mycenaean vessels.³⁷ Moreover, the *Iliad* dates to an age that was familiar with iron, but the Homeric heroes still use bronze weapons like Mycenaean warriors. Some scholars believe that Mycenaean objects are testimonies of the *Iliad*'s long history that reaches back to the Mycenaean Age. However, it is also possible and, in my view, more plausible that ancient objects were integrated into the epics as relics that were familiar to the bards and their audiences. Similarly, the prominence in the epics of Mycenaean places such as Mycena does not imply a continuous tradition, but rather relies on the visible remains of ancient palaces. As Raaflaub points out (1998: 185), such an interpretation erodes the “amalgam-theory” which argues for layers of genuine traditions.

Can we conclude, then, that Mycenaean heirlooms serve as archaisms that mark the heroes' time as a distant past?³⁸ Obviously, objects such as the boar's tusk helmet distance the world of the epics from the present. However, the concept of

archaism, implying an awareness of a difference between past and present that may not wholly apply to the *Iliad*, poses the danger of introducing an anachronistic notion into the epics and therefore needs to be qualified for this context (see also Sherrat 2005: 136).

First, it is striking just how difficult it is to find archaisms beyond material culture. Agamemnon may be called *anax*, but his role is a far cry from that of a Mycenaean king. A non-material instance often interpreted as archaism is the supposed absence of writing.³⁹ Yet even if we ignore a passage in the *Iliad* that seems to mention writing,⁴⁰ we have to acknowledge the fact that in heroic warfare there are only a few situations in which writing could play a role (Heubeck 1979b: 126–7). Thus the absence of writing need not be explained as a conscious effort to avoid a recent development.⁴¹

Second, even the material goods do not reveal a consistent awareness of the differences between past and present. For my argument, the example of the weapons is instructive. The heroes' weapons are made of bronze, but at the same time iron is not avoided in the *Iliad*; agricultural tools in particular are made of iron.⁴² That the use of bronze weapons does not necessarily imply a strict awareness of differences between the Archaic and Mycenaean Ages is revealed by the club of Areithoos. The club is very old, for Areithoos belongs to the generation even before Nestor, but it is made of iron.⁴³ This indicates that bronze weapons do not so much signify a time before iron was used; what matters rather is their brilliance that helps elevate the heroes.⁴⁴ In its own cultural context, what we readily identify as an archaism seems to carry quite a different meaning.

Finally, it is striking that ancient objects such as the boar's tusk helmet or Nestor's cup are already ancient at the level of the action. Rather than being integrated into their contexts, these items stand out. What, then, about the concept of archaism? Not everything that we consider an archaism will have been perceived as such by Archaic Greeks. Bronze weapons, for example, primarily stand for heroic glamour. The archaisms amount to a few select material goods, but there is no consistent awareness of the differences between the heroic past and the present, not even where material goods are concerned. Where such differences are envisaged, they refer to quantity rather than quality – as when heroes are said to have lifted stones that present men would not be able to move – and concern poetic embellishment rather than temporal development. The notion of archaism did not gain its full meaning until the individuality of epochs was made a cornerstone of historical thinking, which happened around 1800 CE (Koselleck 1975, 1979).

What, then, can we conclude about the *Iliad* and history? Greek epic may not be the best instance for elaborating on the use of epics as historical sources, since our comparative evidence is basically the archaeological record. Yet for this very reason Homer is an indispensable source for the student of ancient Greece. While using the *Iliad* as a *Quelle* is highly problematic, the *Iliad* does provide rich insights as an *Überrest*. Homer is not of much use as a guide to the history of events, but he presents important evidence for social history. Social structures of the time when the epics were composed are inscribed in the text, albeit in poetic transformation.

The Iliad as history

In the wake of “New Historicism,” scholars such as Greenblatt (1980) have paid much attention to the historicity of texts, investigating the function of various texts in social and political discourses. This approach has proven particularly fruitful for pre-modern and oral societies in which literature is strongly intertwined with the political, ritual, and social aspects of life.⁴⁵ The Homeric epics not only formed an essential point of reference for nearly all other genres, but Homer also figured as an authority throughout Greek antiquity (e.g., Howie 1995). The early fixation of the poems is testimony to their prominence. Whatever one thinks about the composition of the Homeric epics, it is rather striking that they were mostly fixed no later than the seventh century. That two large poems were stabilized from the fluidity of oral tradition through the institutionalization of performances or, as the unitarians would have it, written down only a short time after the introduction of the alphabet, raises the question of why the Homeric poems were so prominent in the Archaic Age. An important aspect, I suggest, is the socio-political relevance of Homer.

Approaches to the function of the epics are manifold but can roughly be divided into two camps. Several scholars argue, albeit from different angles and with different emphasis, that the poems helped aristocrats to underscore their own status and privileges.⁴⁶ Another group sees in the Homeric poems less the views of a particular social group than a general reflection on social and political issues that was inspired by the rise of the polis.⁴⁷ Two aspects ought to be taken into account in this discussion, the “Sitz im Leben” or sociological setting, and the level of content.

Unfortunately, we know very little about the setting of epic performances in archaic Greece.⁴⁸ In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, bards sing at banquets that resemble aristocratic symposia. If this permits conclusions about the Homeric poems,⁴⁹ it is reasonable to assume that such performances were limited to single episodes, for example the *Doloneia* or the “Funeral Games for Patroclus.”⁵⁰ At the same time, sixth-century evidence suggests that festivals such as the Panathenaea included a competition in epic recitals.⁵¹ Such panhellenic occasions are essential for oralist models of how the epics were fixed. Nagy, for example, places much weight on the old thesis of a Peisistratid recension, according to which Peisistratus and his sons had the epics fixed for the performances at the Panathenaea.⁵² While the idea of panhellenism was crucial to aristocratic identity, the audiences attending such gatherings were socially mixed. This, however, tells us only that the epics were not restricted to aristocratic circles,⁵³ where they would have contributed only to aristocratic self-representation anyway, but it does not provide us with any clues as to whether the epic performances promoted group interests or rather represented general reflections on social and political issues.

For this, the content of the epics provides safer ground. Although we do not find anything approaching clearly demarcated classes in the epics, they do focus on the nobles, and commoners play only a minor role.⁵⁴ Moreover, passages such as the Thersites-episode in *Iliad* 2 are well suited to underscore social hierarchies.⁵⁵ Seen

from this perspective, the *Iliad* readily provides a basis for aristocratic self-assertion. This coincides with the argument that nobles were wont to trace their lineages back to epic heroes.⁵⁶ At the same time, it cannot be ruled out that common people would also have identified with the heroes (Thalmann 1998: 298). Modern TV programs offer examples of dramatic narratives that have an upper-class setting but nevertheless attract lower- and middle-class audiences.⁵⁷ What is more, community affairs figure prominently in the *Iliad*,⁵⁸ and the presentation of the heroes is far from uncritical. The figure of Agamemnon in particular exhibits the dangerous temptation to abuse power. The question is, however, to what degree such intricacies could hinder the use of the larger-than-life heroes for legitimizing purposes of the aristocracy. It is rather striking that Agamemnon was frequently drawn on as a positive example for leadership in classical Greece (Grethlein 2006b: 495).

All in all, we must allow for aristocratic attempts to appropriate the symbolic capital of the heroic epics, but we do more justice to their complexity and polyphony if we see in them a negotiation of political practice and social tensions that does not simply underscore aristocratic claims – for this, the emphasis on communal interests is too strong.⁵⁹

I suggest that it is largely the subtle negotiation of social issues that made the epics so prominent in the Archaic Age. The beginning of this period is commonly viewed as the “Greek Renaissance.”⁶⁰ Scholars emphasize the economic upturn and the first blossoming of the polis during this time. Yet it is worth noting that these developments were also accompanied by the destruction of traditional orders, which must have caused a high degree of insecurity, reflected in early archaic poetry (Stein-Hölkeskamp 1989). “Renaissance” and “crisis” are two sides of the same coin. As Raafaub notes: “The formalization of institutions, the enactment of written law and the appointment of mediators and legislators with extraordinary power served as means, supported by the entire polis, to overcome such crises.”⁶¹ I think we can add the *Iliad* to this list.

History in the *Iliad*

In a last step, I will propose a new approach to the relation between epics and history. While most studies rely on comparing the *Iliad* with the archaeological record and anthropological parallels, I believe that the poem itself provides some interesting insights into its relation to history. A close reading of the *Iliad* will not solve the “riddle” of the Trojan War, but it can provide a new perspective and stimulate questions that are worth considering. My starting point is the observation that the *Iliad* not only presents a past event, but has its heroes also engage with their own past (Kullmann 1968; Grethlein 2006a: 42–153). Thus one could say that a “plu-past” is embedded in the epic past. Strikingly, the relation of the heroes to their own past parallels the narrator’s and the audience’s relation to the heroic past. Certain relics such as Peleus’s spear (16.141–4; 19.388–91) and Nestor’s cup (11.636–7) are too heavy for most of the heroes at Troy to use. Similarly, the

narrator points out that one hero lifts a stone so heavy that no man in his own present could move it (5.302–4; 12.381–3; 445–9; 20.285–7). The inferiority of the heroes compared to their ancestors mirrors their own superiority over present men (Grethlein 2006a: 52–3).

This parallel prompts me to suggest reading the *Iliad*'s plu-past as a mirror of the heroic past. By this I mean that the relation between the plu-past and the past reflects the relation between the past and the present. Pursuing this idea, we can make two interesting observations. First, we note that bards sing of past events, and old heroes such as Nestor and Phoenix tell stories of earlier times, but most frequently the past is evoked by material culture (Grethlein 2008). Not only monuments or "timemarks" such as graves, but also remains that do not have a primary commemorative function are bearers of memory.⁶² For example, one old wall preserves the memory of Poseidon's and Apollo's servitude to Laomedon (7.451–3), a second wall evokes Heracles' fight with the sea-monster (20.145–9), and the fortification of the Achaean camp will be a testimony to the Trojan War, albeit only for a limited time (12.3–33; cf. 7.459–62). Seen from this perspective, the walls encapsulate a full-blown history of Troy (Grethlein 2008: 32–5). Moreover, the past is also inscribed in commodities. Some material goods have "biographies."⁶³ Agamemnon's scepter (2.100–9), Meriones' boar's tusk helmet (10.261–6), and Ereuthalion's club (7.137–50) are each presented with a history. Thus in the *Iliad* material objects, ranging from memorials to everyday goods, are bearers of memory. The epic plu-past has a strongly material side.

This observation, transferred from the level of the plot to the *Iliad* itself as an act of memory, supports the thesis that the rise of the Greek epic was inspired by those Mycenaean ruins that were still visible in the Archaic Age. As pointed out earlier, I doubt that the composition of the *Iliad* can be linked to a particular place. But a general stimulus via Mycenaean ruins is suggested not only by the heroic plu-past but also by the simultaneous interest in material remains. In the eighth century, already existing hero cults intensified and new ones emerged.⁶⁴ Moreover, other remains such as Mycenaean gems appear to have been reused.⁶⁵ Given the material side of the past in the *Iliad*, it is plausible not only to view the epic tradition and the reuse of Mycenaean remains as reflecting a common interest in the past,⁶⁶ but also to argue that the material remains from the Mycenaean Age provided the epic tradition with a key inspiration.⁶⁷

The mirror of the epic plu-past also implies another, more speculative suggestion concerning the relation of epic and history. Strikingly, the heroes' memory does not go back very far, rarely more than three generations. Obviously, this ties in well with studies of oral traditions (Henige 1974, 1982; Vansina 1985), but does it also allow us to conclude that the Archaic Greeks linked the Mycenaean remains and the epic heroes not with a distant but with a recent past? Two objections immediately spring to mind. First, are the material remains not too monumental and the heroes too strong to be located only in the recent past? Does the gap between the past and the present not require substantial temporal distance? I would not put much stock on this point because it does not pay sufficient attention to the epic view of history.

Although the past the heroes remember is only the very recent past, it is far superior to their present (Grethlein 2006a: 48–58). As the example of Diomedes and Tydeus shows (4.370–400; 5.800–13), a huge gap already separates the heroes from their fathers. Phoenix locates the story of Meleager in the *palai*, the age of “once upon a time” (9.527–8), but a look at the chronology reveals that he is only one generation older than the heroes of Troy (Grethlein 2006a: 56).

A second objection is more difficult to invalidate. Apart from comparisons of the heroes with present men, the *Iliad* nowhere links the heroic time to the present (Kullmann 1999: 104). Instead, the heroic past appears as a closed period. This impression is fostered by the deluge adumbrated at the beginning of *Iliad* 12.⁶⁸ Evidently, this does not square with the thesis that the archaic Greeks placed the epics in the recent past and perhaps linked themselves with the heroes through short genealogies. And yet, this objection needs at least some qualification. The lack of temporal links parallels the avoidance of references to local cults. It is possible, therefore, to argue that the erasure of both local cults (Nagy 1979: 7–11) and present time is due to the panhellenization of the epic tradition. As is the case with cults, temporal links would have tied the epics to particular places and would thereby have impaired their panhellenic relevance. Moreover, it is rather likely that the traditions which the *Iliad* relied upon and “streamlined” for a panhellenic audience contained links both to cults and to the present time. Yet, despite the *Iliad*’s panhellenic stance, the possibility cannot be ruled out that audiences themselves established links to their own time. It is rather likely that aristocrats traced their own genealogies back to the heroic age in order to underscore their social status.⁶⁹

If we take all of this into account, the suggestion seems worth serious consideration that the archaic Greeks located Mycenaean remains and epic heroes in a rather recent past, albeit separated from the present by a gap.⁷⁰ In this scenario, it is only the panhellenization of the epic tradition that led to a rigorous avoidance of temporal links and thereby established “heroic vagueness.”⁷¹

Conclusion

As is the case with other poetic traditions, the *Iliad* claims to bestow and therefore to embody “imperishable glory” (*kleos aphthiton*);⁷² as I argue elsewhere, it underscores this claim by juxtaposing itself with material media of memory (Grethlein 2008). While even the monumental fortification of the Achaeans will be annihilated by a deluge (12.3–33) and not even Nestor is able to ascertain the significance of a *sēma* that could previously have been a tomb (23.326–33; cf. Lynn-George 1988: 266; Dickson 1995: 218–19; Nagy 1983), the poetic tradition of the *Iliad* establishes imperishable glory. And indeed, at the beginning of the twenty-first century CE the story of Achilles’ wrath still casts its spell over its readers.

Yet, the historian is forced to apply a “subversive” reading. Whereas *kleos aphthiton* trumpets Achilles’ great deeds, reading the *Iliad* as a *Quelle* for the history of events has proven to be rather problematic. At the same time, the *Iliad* is very fruitful as an

Überrest. The Homeric epics provide us with important insights into the social and cultural history of the time of their fixation. The *Iliad* can also be read as part of history, particularly as the attempt to cope with immense social ruptures and changes. Finally, I have argued that the embedded past in the *Iliad* mirrors the heroic past as seen by the Archaic Greeks. Epic poetry is a source not only for history, but also for the history of history, revealing a distinct idea of history.

Notes

- * I wish to thank David Konstan and Kurt A. Raafaub for their comments on this chapter and I am also grateful to Hans-Joachim Gehrke and Robin Osborne for discussing Homer and the history of Archaic Greece with me.
- 1 Neo-analytical scholars such as Pestalozzi 1945, Kakridis 1949, Kullmann 1960, and more recently, from an oralist perspective, Burgess 2001, have emphasized that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are based on a rich epic tradition, the traces of which are preserved in the fragments of the “epic cycle” (edited by Bernabé 1987–2004; Davies 1988). On the definition of Greek epic poetry, see the different approaches by Ford 1992: 13–56; 1997; Foley 2004; Martin 2005.
- 2 All dates are BCE, unless otherwise noted.
- 3 For the second half of the eighth century, see Janko 1982: 228–31; Kirk 1985: 1–10; Latacz 1985: 74–85 (1996: 56–9). For the early seventh century, see Burkert 1976; Crielaard 1995a: 274; West 1995; Kullmann 1999: 110, and the works cited by Raafaub 1998: 188 n. 71. For the ninth century, see Ruijgh 1995. For the sixth century, see Jensen 1980; Seaford 1994: 144–54.
- 4 See, e.g., Latacz 1985 [1996]; Kullmann 1985; Reichel 1994.
- 5 Nagy, for example, has drawn a complex model of how the epics were transmitted, and this model does not establish a final fixation in writing until the Alexandrian philologists (1996: 41–2; 2003: 2). For other oralist approaches to the Greek epics, see Nagler 1974; Janko 1982.
- 6 See Droysen 1977: 67–100 on the different kinds of evidence with which historians work.
- 7 Simonides’ Plataea elegy (Boedeker and Sider 2001) implicitly compares those who died at Salamis to Achilles. One of the epigrams on the statues erected by Cimon after the capture of Eion praised the recent victory, another Menestheus’s bravery in the Trojan War (Aeschines 3. 183–5; Plutarch, *Cimon* 7.5). The “Painted Stoa” in the Athenian Agora, dated around 460, juxtaposes two scenes from the *Iliupersis* and the Amazonomachy with the battle of Marathon and another contemporary battle, perhaps the battle of Oinoe; cf. Hölkeskamp 2001: 342 n. 69. For further archaeological and iconographic evidence, see Francis 1990; Castriota 1992; Hölscher 1998: 163–9.
- 8 On Alexander and Achilles, see Edmunds 1971: 368–81, who points out the religious background and argues that the imitation of Achilles was not mere propaganda; Stewart 1993: 78–86; Cohen 1995; Carney 2000: 274–85.
- 9 Thuc. 1.9–12; also 3.104.4–6; cf. Jung 1991: 38–60.
- 10 See also Plut. *Alex.* 15.9; Ovid, *Met.* 15.424–5; Lucan, *Phars.* 9.990–5; Herodian 4.84.
- 11 On earlier expeditions, see Easton 1991; Cobet et al. 1991; S. Allen 1999: 11–109, who emphasizes Schliemann’s dependence on Calvert. On Schliemann, see Calder and Cobet 1990; Traill 1993, 1995; Cobet 1997; Easton 2002.

- 12 See, for example, the devastating verdict of Wilamowitz 1906: 59.
- 13 For a survey of different opinions in scholarship, see Cobet 2003: 25–38.
- 14 The controversy was triggered by Frank Kolb’s critical comments on an exhibition that presented the results of Korfmann’s new excavations at Troy. For an introduction to this debate, see Cobet and Gehrke 2002.
- 15 Latacz 2004, 2005. See also many contributions to the journal *Studia Troica*, founded in 1991.
- 16 See the contributions in Ulf 2003, a critical review Latacz’s arguments from various perspectives. For a positive reception, see, e.g., Niemeier 1999.
- 17 Most recently, the Homeric controversy among German-speaking scholars has entered a second round which focuses on Raoul Schrott’s thesis (2008) that Homer composed his poems in Cilicia.
- 18 See, with slightly different emphasis, Davies and Foxhall 1984: 180–1.
- 19 See Heinhold-Krahmer 2003a and b; Hajnal 2003 with earlier bibliography.
- 20 Epigraphic evidence indicates that Hisarlik was Ilion in Hellenistic and Roman Imperial times, but this does not necessarily imply that it was identified with Troy in the Archaic Age. Given the ease with which the ancient Greeks “invented” traditions, it cannot be ruled out that Ilion’s claim to be built on the ruins of old Troy was a later construction. Interestingly, the identification of Ilion as Troy was already questioned by Strabo (13.1.35–43) who relied on Demetrios of Skepsis. For a discussion of cases in which identifications turned out to be wrong, see Sinn 2003.
- 21 See Ehrismann 1987 and Classen (this volume) on the *Nibelungenlied*; Raaflaub 2005 in general. The stable transmission of the Indian *Mahabharata* epic, a remarkable exception, is due to the sacred character of the text; but see Fitzgerald, this volume. On the transformation of memory in oral societies, see Henige 1974; 1982; Vansina 1985. For an application to classical Athens, see Thomas 1989; more generally, von Ungern-Sternberg and Reinau 1988.
- 22 For example, Kullmann 1999 questions the application to the Homeric epics of insights gained from the study of oral traditions.
- 23 It is also crucial to take into account regional differences; see Whitley 1991; Morris 1997, and now Raaflaub and van Wees 2009.
- 24 Although long before Finley (1956) some scholars were skeptical about this identification: notably Calhoun 1934; Schadewaldt 1942. At the same time, the old reading has not died out: see Deger-Jalkotzy 1991a: 53–66; 1991b: 146–9.
- 25 Ventris and Chadwick 1953; 1956. On the impact of the decipherment of Linear B on our understanding of Mycenaean culture, see Heubeck 1979a; also Chadwick 1976.
- 26 However, Dickinson 1986 still finds many correspondences between the epics and the Dark Ages. Ruijgh 1995 uses linguistic evidence for a ninth-century date.
- 27 Kirk 1962: 179–210; Snodgrass 1974: 114–25; Geddes 1984; Sherrat 1990; 2005: 136–8. For further bibliography, see Raaflaub 1991: 210 nn. 17–18; Crielaard 1995a: 206 n. 14.
- 28 Morris 1986; Ulf 1990; van Wees 1992; Crielaard 1995a; Raaflaub 1997, 1998.
- 29 Raaflaub 1998. See also Ulf 1990: 261. For criticism of the “amalgam-theory,” see also Morris 1986: 104–15; 1997: 558–9; van Wees 1992: 15–17, who emphasizes poetic freedom; Hellmann 2000: 178.
- 30 For a theoretical conceptualization of this process, see, e.g., Iser 1991.
- 31 Ulf 1990; Raaflaub 1991: 239–47; 1993: 46–59; 1997: 641–8; Hammer 2002; Hölkeskamp 2002; Osborne 2004: 211–16.

- 32 See Raaflaub 1993: 54–5 with further literature in 54 n. 54.
- 33 T. W. Allen 1921; Burr 1944; Page 1959: 118–77; Hope Simpson and Lazenby 1970.
- 34 Cf. Visser 1997. See also the critique of Giovannini's thesis by Kirk 1985: 184–5.
- 35 Singor 1991, 1995; van Wees 1992; Hellmann 2000. See now also van Wees 2004; Raaflaub 2008.
- 36 See the list in Kirk 1960: 191–2; Patzek 1992: 186–202.
- 37 Cf. Marinatos 1954; Collinge 1957: 55–9; Bruns 1970: 25, 42–3; Hainsworth 1993: ad 11.623–35 with further bibliography. However, Dickinson 1986: 22 questions the Mycenaean character of Nestor's cup.
- 38 Redfield 1975: 35–9; Giovannini 1989; Crielaard 1995a: 274–5; Hölkeskamp 2002: 301.
- 39 Crielaard 1995a: 273; Raaflaub 1998: 175. For further bibliography, see Heubeck 1979b: 136 nn. 717–21.
- 40 The letter of Proitos mentioned by Glaukos in *Il.* 6.168–70; cf. Heubeck 1979b: 128–46. Powell 1991: 199–200 offers a different interpretation.
- 41 Another interesting case is the use of chariots. Crouwel 1992: 106–7 points out strong similarities to the use of chariots in the Iron Age, and van Wees 1994: 9–13 and Raaflaub 2008: 482 argue in different ways for an internally consistent poetic presentation of chariots in combat.
- 42 Iron is mentioned as precious material in 6.48=10.379=11.133; 7.473; 23.261, 850. For iron tools, see 4.485; 18.34; 23.30, 834. On the use of metals in the *Iliad*, see Gray 1954.
- 43 *Il.* 7.138–41. See also iron arrow heads in 4.123.
- 44 By contrast, West 1978: ad Hes. *Works and Days* 150, suggests that bronze weapons were embedded in a long epic tradition.
- 45 For an emphasis on this perspective in Homeric studies, see Thalmann 1998.
- 46 Nicolai 1983; Morris 1986 (with the criticism of Taplin 1992: 49 n. 4; Seaford 1994: 181–2; Hammer 2002: 12 n. 43); Stein-Hölkeskamp 1989: 21. For a more complex assessment of the *Iliad*'s relevance for aristocrats see Rose 1988; on the *Odyssey*, see Thalmann 1998: 272–305. Winter 1995 suggests that the epics present an aristocratic view, but thereby distract and finally prevent aristocrats from defending their own claims in the emerging polis. Rose 1997, on the other hand, sees the rise of the polis as an aristocratic development and argues that the epics do not so much present the struggle between aristocracy and polis, but are rather “a more complex struggle within the ruling element over the issue of one-man rule vs. the collective exercise of power by aristocrats” (181). For further bibliography, see Hammer 2002: 148 n. 7.
- 47 The fullest example of this view is Hammer 2002, who approaches politics as an activity and sees “plebiscitary politics” at the core of the *Iliad* (153–69). See also Raaflaub 1991: 248–50; Hölkeskamp 2002: 331–3; Ulf 2003b: 283–4. Seaford 1994 uses both analytical and neo-analytical concepts to argue that the development of the polis inscribed itself particularly into the ends of both *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Wilson 2002: 136 reads the *Iliad* as promoting reciprocity. Scully 1990: 96–7 suggests that the recent emergence of the polis left its mark in the monumental form of the *Iliad*. For further bibliography, consult the survey in Hammer 2002: 150–2.
- 48 Discussion in Kirk 1962: 274–81; see also Nagy 1996; Collins 2001.
- 49 Macleod 1983; Nagy 1989; Ford 1992; Segal 1994. Foley 2005a: 199 argues that we ought to beware of drawing conclusions from songs within the epics for the epics themselves.

- 50 See Heiden 1996 on possible divisions of the *Iliad* for performances.
- 51 Hdt. 5.67 offers evidence for rhapsodic contests at Sikyon in the sixth century, Thuc. 3.104 for panionian recitations on Delos.
- 52 Nagy 1996: 107–14; 2002. See also Merkelbach 1952; Jensen 1980: 128–58; Collins 2001; Cairns 2001: 1–7. By contrast, Scodel 2002: 54–5 emphasizes that the textualization of the epics was not limited to Athens.
- 53 Kirk 1962: 274–80; Scully 1990: 98–9; Seaford 1994: 182; Dalby 1995; Rose 1997: 190–1. Doherty 1992 argues for an internal female audience in the *Odyssey*.
- 54 On the social status of the Homeric heroes, see Calhoun 1934; Strasburger 1953; Geddes 1984; Ulf 1990; Haubold 2000.
- 55 But see the subtle reading by Rose 1988, distinguishing in the Thersites episode many layers that would appeal to a mixed audience.
- 56 Morris 1988: 757; West 1978: ad Hes. *Works and Days* 106–201. For a later example, see the examination of the Philaid-genealogy by Thomas 1989: 161–73; Möller 1996: 21–5.
- 57 David Konstan kindly points out to me another striking example of cross-class identification: whereas Ben Jonson wrote his plays for small elite audiences, William Shakespeare addressed a much broader audience. Nonetheless, it is the latter who populates his stage with royalty.
- 58 Raaflaub 1993: 46–59; Hammer 2002. According to Wilson 2002 the *Iliad* promotes reciprocity.
- 59 Although Homeric society closely corresponds to Greek society in the early Archaic Age, the role of strong and ambitious individuals in a dynamic society, as discussed in the *Iliad*, remained relevant throughout this period; cf. Wilson 2002: 136.
- 60 Cf. Hägg 1983 and the titles of relevant chapters in Snodgrass 1971: 416; Coldstream 1977: 109.
- 61 Raaflaub 1997: 57; cf. idem 1993: 68–75. See also Stein-Hölkeskamp 1989; Grethlein 2006a: 316–17.
- 62 On the concept of “timemark,” see Chapman 1997: 43. For a list of tombs in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, see Pfister 1909: 541–3; Mannsperger and Mannsperger 2002: 1076.
- 63 The study of the biography of things was initiated by Rivers 1910. For a recent survey, see *World Archaeology* 31 (1999); for an application to Greek epics, see Grethlein 2008: 35–43.
- 64 The literature on Greek hero cult is vast. See, for example, Antonaccio 1995, who sharply distinguishes between hero and ancestor cults; Hägg 1999; Boehringer 2001.
- 65 Boardman 1970: 107; for old finds in the tombs at Eleusis, see Overbeck 1980. See also Boardman 2002: 81–2.
- 66 Farnell 1921, Coldstream 1976, and West 1988: 151 argue that funerals and cults were inspired by the epics. For arguments to the contrary, see Snodgrass 1982 and Crielaard 1995a: 266–73, who emphasize that hero cults and epics were independent of each other, but were based on a common interest in the past.
- 67 Heubeck 1984: 14–21; Morris 1988: 750; Giovannini 1989; Tausend 1990, and particularly Patzek 1992, who persuasively argues that the epics are not based on a long and continuous tradition, but are the retrojection of a newly awakened historical awareness guided by material leftovers. I share Patzek’s general assessment, but I disagree with her view of the eighth century which in her analysis strongly resembles the early Modern Age. This reconstruction does justice neither to all the ruptures and upheavals in history nor to the strong emphasis in the epics on the perilous force of chance.

- 68 Aristotle fr. 162. Rose argues that the destruction of the Achaean camp by a great flood is mentioned because no ruins were left to be seen in Homer's time. For a more recent argument, see Bassi 2005: 24. See also Scodel 1982 who argues in favor of integrating oriental legends about floods.
- 69 It has been argued that the long genealogy of Aeneas in *Iliad* 22 reflects the poet's wish to flatter a noble family in his own time, perhaps one that was entertaining him (see bibliography in Grethlein 2006a: 66 n. 69). However, there is no conclusive evidence for this origin of the genealogy because it needs no extra-textual justifications and is firmly embedded in its narrative context (Smith 1981; Grethlein 2006a: 65–70). Yet this does not rule out the possibility that aristocratic recipients of the *Iliad* themselves established genealogical links to epic heroes.
- 70 On later attempts to date the Trojan War in antiquity, see Burkert 1995.
- 71 It is worth noting that in the South Slavic tradition the resistance during World War II became the object of an epic tradition immediately after the war; cf. Foley 2005a: 205.
- 72 Cf. Nagy 1974: 250–5; Rubino 1979: 15–17; Grethlein 2006a: 135–45. On Indo-European parallels such as “sraṇah . . . aksitam” in the *Rig-Veda*, see Schmitt 1967: 62–70; Nagy 1974: 231–40.

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Historical Narrative in Archaic and Early Classical Greek Elegy

EWEN BOWIE

This chapter revisits the question of how far Greek narrative elegy of the archaic and early classical periods can be seen as an early stage in the development of Greek historiography, offering very tentative answers to the sorts of questions addressed by other contributors to this volume.¹ In particular I shall try to establish, so far as is possible, to what extent there seem to have been unwritten rules (to use the terminology of Rossi 1971) that distinguished the subject matter and treatment thought appropriate for elegy from those thought appropriate for hexameter epic, a genre that stood very close to elegy both in meter and in language. In an appendix I make a very brief comparison with what we know of the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* and of the epics of the so-called “cycle,” and with the first post-Homeric hexameter epic to survive complete, the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes.

Of the early Greek narrative elegiac poems that are attested in later Greek and Latin writers – in all cases, it must be stressed, precariously – or that are preserved fragmentarily on papyri from Greco-Roman Egypt, some are known by no more than either their title (which itself is very likely to be later than the poem’s composition) – so Semonides of Amorgos’s *Archaiologia* (“Early history”) of the *Samians*² – or by a single detail of their narrative – so Archilochus’s poem on Heracles, Nessus, and Deianeira (fr. 286–9 West). My discussion will therefore concentrate on Tyrtaeus’s *Eunomia*, Mimnermus’s *Smyrneis*, Xenophanes’ *Foundation of Colophon and Migration to Elea in Italy*, Panyassis’ *Ionian History* and the poem of Simonides of Ceos on the battle of Plataea, though it will also look more briefly at Callinus and Archilochus.

Tyrtaeus’s *Eunomia*

An elegiac poem ascribed to Tyrtaeus and entitled *Eunomia* (“Good Government”) was known to Aristotle in the fourth century BCE (*Politics* 1306b36 = Tyrtaeus fr. 1

West): four lines of it are cited by Strabo in the first century BCE (8.4.10 p.362C = fr. 2 West), also using the title *Eunomia*. The part of the poem known to Aristotle gives evidence of political unrest in Sparta (in particular a demand for the redistribution of land) at the time of a war against Messenia. Whether this unrest belonged to Tyrtaeus's own time (apparently c. 650 BCE)³ or had happened in earlier generations, it seems very plausible to ascribe to this same poem *Eunomia* 13 further lines quoted in the second century CE by Pausanias (4.6.5 = fr. 5 West; 4.14.4–5 = fr. 6 and 7 West; cf. fr. 8 and 9 West), which narrate the Spartan conquest of Messenia under Theopompus that is explicitly presented by Tyrtaeus as having happened two generations before his own time (fr. 5 West), and also a substantial block of ten lines quoted in the first century BCE by Diodorus from Agyrrhium in Sicily (7.12.6 = fr. 4 West)⁴ concerning Spartan consultation of Apollo's oracle at Delphi.

The lines cited by Strabo (which also fall within 16 lines preserved very fragmentarily on a papyrus of the first or second century CE, Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 2824) offer a miniature narrative of the arrival in the Peloponnese of the sons of Heracles (claimed as ancestors by Spartan kings), an event of the distant "mythical" past (what we would think of as the twelfth century BCE):

]let us obey[10
]nearer to the kin[
 for the son of Cronos himself, the husband of Hera of the lovely garland,
 Zeus, gave this city to the children of Heracles,
 together with whom we left windy Erineon
 and arrived in the broad island of Pelops.
(Tyrtaeus fr. 2.10–15 West)

For this vignette Tyrtaeus may have drawn upon a tradition shared by most or at least many of the inhabitants of Laconia and accepted by some other Greeks in the Peloponnese. By contrast his account of events of two generations before his own time presumably draws on a different sort of source, or a source that might have stood in a quite different relation to the material transmitted. Of this account two substantial fragments remain. One concerns the Spartan conquest of Messenia:

for our king, dear to the gods, Theopompus
 through whom we seized Messene of the broad dancing-floors,
 Messene good to plough, and good to plant:
 over her they fought for nineteen years,
 always relentlessly keeping enduring spirit in their heart, 5
 the spearmen who were our fathers' fathers;
 and in the twentieth year they [sc. the Messenians] forsook their rich farms
 and began to flee from Ithome's mighty mountains.
(Tyrtaeus fr. 5 West)

There is little detail here, and since the narrative of military conquest is introduced in a relative clause elaborating the identity of king Theopompus, it may not indeed

have set out to offer anything more than a summary narration: we have no idea what preceded these lines, nor indeed what sort of sentence had a syntax that resulted in Theopompus appearing in the dative, in enjambement, at the beginning of our first preserved line. As I have observed before, the phrases “for nineteen years,” “our fathers’ fathers,” and “in the twentieth year” display an attention to chronology that was later to be fundamental to historiography; at the same time, the pattern of a struggle for nineteen years crowned by success in the twentieth is suspiciously similar to that offered by the *Odyssey* for the return of its hero Odysseus, and it is not unreasonable to question the reliability of this chronology – perhaps more an epicization of the Spartan annexation of Messenia than a genuine move towards historiographical precision.⁵

The other substantial fragment narrates the consultation of Delphi, in Plutarch’s version by the Spartan kings Theopompus and Polydorus:⁶

After listening to Phoebus they brought home from Pytho
 the god’s oracles and unerring utterances:
 that there should be at the head of deliberation the god-honoured kings
 whose concern is the desirable polis of Sparta,
 and the old men of senior birth; and then the men of the people 5
 answering in reply with straight enunciations
 should speak fair things and perform all things just,
 and not deliberate for this city anything <crooked>:⁷
 and to the mass of the people victory and power should follow.
 For that is how Phoebus made revelation to the polis about these things. 10
 (Tyrtaeus fr. 4 West)

Both these accounts are very likely to depend on what Tyrtaeus knew from the oral narratives, debates, or casual remarks of older members of the Spartan political elite and from discussions he may have had with them (probing interrogation need not be a technique invented by Herodotus).⁸ His own presentation is likely to have been massaged to fit those views of this elite that he shared and respected, and indeed to carry a message appropriate to the political tensions in which he composed and performed the poem.⁹ On our present evidence it remains unclear whether the primary mode of the poem was hortatory, with the use of a long historical example (or examples) to reinforce the argument, or narrative, with at least one point at which the poet made a recommendation, viz. “let us obey” (*peithōmetha*, fr. 2.10 West).¹⁰

It seems probable that this poem had a greater influence on how the crises of the reigns of Theopompus and Polydorus were later perceived than did other traditions that must have existed in Tyrtaeus’s time, that were presumably transmitted orally for some generations in prose, and that are now lost to us. But Tyrtaeus is nowhere mentioned by Herodotus, and what came to Herodotus from his sources clearly had even greater influence on later accounts. Certainly the existence of the *Eunomia* elegy did not prevent another tradition developing (e.g., that found in Herodotus 5.65–8) in which major political contributions to Spartan “good government”

were credited to Lycurgus (who seems certainly to have been absent from Tyrtaeus) rather than to Theopompus or Polydorus.¹¹ For some Spartans (and later for some non-Spartans like Plutarch, though not for the creators of the tradition about the leader of Messenian resistance to Sparta, Aristomenes),¹² the *Eunomia*, together with Tyrtaeus's martial hortatory elegies, may have constituted the main "documentary" text on which later views of things military and political in Sparta of the period c. 700–640 BCE were based.¹³

Mimnermus's *Smyrneis*

An apparently narrative elegy by Mimnermus entitled *Smyrneis*, "The Saga of Smyrna," is even less easy to reconstruct. As may have been the case with Tyrtaeus's *Eunomia*, an hour-glass shape is one possible profile for the poem, with attention near its beginning to the city's "mythical" foundation by an Amazon called Smyrna; then perhaps material on the arrival of settlers from Pylos (in the Peloponnese) at Colophon (in Asia Minor) and on their subsequent move to Smyrna; finally, near its end, an account of a war between the Smyrnaeans and King Gyges of Lydia (presumably located in the 660s and/or 650s BCE, and certainly no later than the date of Gyges' death, conventionally ascribed to 652), a war fought within or shortly before Mimnermus's own lifetime.¹⁴

But of all these only fr. 13a West, a couplet narrating the rapid response of the aides of a king (presumably Gyges) to a speech he had made, is explicitly ascribed to the *Smyrneis*:¹⁵

So did they from the king, when he had given his words of instruction,
speed forth, protecting themselves with their curved shields.
(Mimnermus fr. 13a West)

It is also very probable that a remark of Pausanias relates to the same poem:

And Mimnermus, composing elegiacs on the battle of the Smyrnaeans against Gyges and the Lydians, says in his prooemion that the older Muses are the daughters of Uranos, and that other Muses, younger than these, are the children of Zeus. (Pausanias 9.29.4 = Mimnermus fr. 13 West)

Much less certain is the ascription to this poem of an 11-line fragment transmitted by the sixth-century CE anthologist John of Stobi (3.7.11 = fr. 14 West), in which Mimnermus contrasts a lesser contemporary fighter with one who more successfully fought the Lydians in a previous generation, a contrast modeled on that between Tydeus and his father Diomedes in the *Iliad*:

Not indeed was that warrior's might and courageous heart
like this, so I have learned from my forebears, who saw him

throwing into confusion the serried squadrons of Lydian cavalymen
 across the plain of the Hermus, a man wielding an ashen spear.
 In his case never at all did Pallas Athene reproach 5
 the piercing might of his heart, when among the foremost fighters
 he charged in the uproar of bloody war,
 forcing his way through the stinging missiles of the foe.
 For no one of the enemy was a man better than he
 in ranging across the mighty battle-roar's 10
 handiwork, when he was borne like (?) the rays of the swift sun . . .
 (Mimnermus fr. 14 West)

If we accept that fr. 13 West as well as the inalienable fr. 13a West belong to the *Smyrneis*, then an elaborate invocation to the Muses (which may perhaps have preceded a catalogue, as in *Iliad* 2.484–93, and in Apollonius's miniature invocation of the Muse at *Argonautica* 1.21), and the presence of at least one speech, together show Homeric "epicizing" of the material;¹⁶ that epic color would be enhanced by the reworking of the Diomedes scene in *Iliad* Book 4 if fr. 14 West also belongs to this poem. That same fragment's possible appeal to an older generation (*proteroi*, "earlier men") as the source for Mimnermus's account of his spectacularly successful warrior suggests that for this detail, and perhaps for parts of the war as a whole, the memories of the poet's elders played an important part in his reconstructions, though his own memory may also have made a contribution.¹⁷

Further problems are raised by two fragments that Strabo explicitly ascribes to the *Nanno*, a book that, on other evidence, I am not alone in taking to be a collection of Mimnermus's shorter poems composed for sympotic performance.¹⁸ The first of these fragments is introduced by Strabo (14.1.4 p. 634C) in his account of the Ionian settlement of Colophon and Smyrna:

And later they [sc. the Ionian Smyrnaeans] were thrown out by Aeolians and took refuge in Colophon, and mounting an attack with the people of that city they retook their own, just as indeed Mimnermus describes in the *Nanno*, recalling that Smyrna had always been fought over:

And leaving (?) Aeptyian Pylos, the city of Neleus,
 we arrived at desirable Asia in our ships
 and bringing to lovely Colophon our violence with superior weapons
 we settled, leaders of tough aggression:
 and from there setting forth from the (?) Kalaon river 5
 by the gods' will we seized Aeolian Smyrna.
 (Mimnermus fr. 9 West)

A similar theme is found in a detail given earlier by Strabo (13.1.3 p. 633C):

And Andraemon of Pylos (settled) Colophon, as indeed Mimnermus says in the *Nanno*.

If the *Smyrneis* did indeed have a section on the early history of Smyrna, this is just the sort of material we would expect to find in it. But Strabo is in general a careful reader of the texts he uses, and though it still seems to me theoretically possible (cf. Bowie 1986: 30) that he has erroneously ascribed to the *Nanno* lines that were actually from the *Smyrneis*, perhaps simply because this was the only title of a Mimnerman poem with which he or his readership were familiar, I now doubt that this is the correct explanation. More plausible, I think, is that some episodes in Smyrnaean history may have been treated both in the long poem *Smyrneis* and in shorter poems composed with a view to sympotic performance.

If that is so, then we cannot have any confidence that the close identification of the poet with his addressees, brought out in fr. 9 West by his three uses of the first person plural in six lines, was also a feature of the *Smyrneis* (though recall the first person plural in Tyrtaeus's *Eunomia*, fr. 2.10 and 5.2 West). If, however, it was, this is one way in which the *Smyrneis* was markedly different from Homeric epic (and, indeed, from historiography as written by Herodotus, Thucydides, and most later Greek historians, though not from Roman historiography written in Latin).

That the *Smyrneis* survived so that Callimachus could allude to it in his *Explanations* (*Aitia* fr. 1.11–12), and that both Pausanias and commentators on Antimachus could read it, might hint that it had some role in the Smyrnaeans' construction of their past between the seventh and the third centuries BCE (after which its presence in libraries will have secured its survival); and we do know that in the imperial period Mimnermus was commemorated by a gymnasium named after him (the Mimnermeion) at Smyrna, possibly even involving cult.¹⁹ But we cannot tell whether there were competing accounts of the Gyges war, either in Mimnermus's own lifetime or later, or how the account of Mimnermus related to that later given by Herodotus (like Tyrtaeus, Mimnermus is not mentioned by Herodotus); and as far as we can see the great orator of the second century CE, Aelius Aristides, whose main forum of sophistic activity was Smyrna, did not draw on Mimnermus in depicting Smyrna's glories before its disastrous earthquake, its desolation after the earthquake, or its renascent beauty after reconstruction (*Orations* 17–21 Keil).

Archilochus's *Deianeira* and *Telephus*

I have earlier argued (Bowie 2001) that references in Dio of Prusa, in Pseudo-Longinus and in scholia to the *Iliad* and to the *Argonautica* of Apollonius establish the existence (and the survival into the Roman imperial period) of an elegiac poem in which Archilochus recounted the story that Nessus attempted to rape Deianeira as he carried her across the river Euenus and was consequently killed by Heracles.²⁰ If I am right to claim the existence of such a poem, one thing we can be sure of is that it contained a speech delivered by Deianeira, the length and occasion of which seemed inappropriate to some critics (fr. 286 West = Dio of Prusa 60.1). On the scant evidence we have, this is a poem in which elegy handled material usually treated in hexameter epic, and did so in the same way as hexameter epic.

Archilochus's skills in narrating mythological episodes have since been further illuminated by the publication in 2005 of Oxyrhynchus papyrus 4078, in which he tells of the Argives' landing in Mysia, which they mistook for the Troad, and of their expulsion by Telephus, though Telephus is injured, flees, and is assisted by his father Heracles. Much scholarly attention has made some features of this narrative clearer,²¹ but it is still uncertain whether the episode was introduced as an *exemplum* to justify flight in battle by Archilochus in a personal situation he has been recounting (the view of the first editor, Dirk Obbink, and still the majority view) or whether (as I believe is possible) it was a self-standing mythological narrative. The key lines are the extremely fragmentary opening sequence on our papyrus, lines 2–5: I print below a translation of the text of lines 2–8 as offered by the *editio princeps* (Obbink 2005):

But if [to flee?] under the powerful constraint of a god
 ought not to be termed spiritlessness and cowardice,
 [well did we hasten] to flee our [hostile woes]: [there is a right time] to flee;
 and once, though on his own, Telephus of the stock of Arcasus 5
 terrified into flight a numerous host of Argives, and they fled in fear,
 valiant – indeed so much fear does the gods' destiny bring –
 spearmen though they were . . .

(P.Oxy. 4078 fr. 1.2–8)

Supplementing a first person plural verb in line 4 that describes action or even decision-making compels us to read the Telephus narrative as an *exemplum*. But if we supplement a verb such as “we know” (*epistameth'*) or “we have received a tradition” (*edexameth'*),²² this would allow the mythological narrative to be unrelated to any account of his own actions by the singer. We could, for example, be at the point of transition to the particular story the poet is now going to give his audience²³ from a prooemium which contained reflections on modes of heroism, reflections both general and particular (not unlike, therefore, the prooemium of Simonides fr. 11 West; cf. what I have argued above for Mimnermus fr. 13 West).²⁴

If the Telephus narrative was indeed a narration of myth “for its own sake,” then we may now have two such cases attested for Archilochus, *Deianeira* and *Telephus*. But before concluding that this is a clear exception to the general practice observed in other early elegists, that they use longer elegies for narrating the early or recent political and military history of their polis, it is worth speculating on the presence of Heracles in both narratives. Heracles had at least one major cult on Thasos, and some form of performance of poems about Heracles might have been associated with his cult. It is a remote possibility (very remote, I must concede) that local traditions about Heracles in some way claimed his association with a proto-foundation of a Greek settlement on Thasos, and that narratives of deeds of Heracles could be perceived on Thasos (as of course they could be perceived at Thebes) as part of the city's very early history. So far we have nothing by Archilochus in elegiacs that can be securely classified as narrative of recent history.²⁵

Callinus

A word should be said about the fourth of the known seventh-century elegists, Callinus, who competed in ancient traditions for the title of “discoverer” of the elegiac couplet (cf. Orion, *Etym.* s.v. *elegos*, col. 58.8 Sturz). Our meager remains are dominated by a 21-line fragment of martial exhortation preserved by John of Stobi (4.10.12 = fr. 1 West). The only title we have so far is that of a *Prayer* or *Hymn to Zeus* (“the *logos* to Zeus,” Strabo 14.1.4 p. 633C = fr. 2 and 2a West). But in some of Callinus’s surviving poetry Strabo (14.1.40 p. 647C) was also able to discover mention of Magnesia prevailing in a war against Ephesus and of a Cimmerian attack which resulted in their capture of Sardis and which Strabo thinks is earlier than that war:²⁶ this is presumably the attack which brought about Gyges’ death, generally held to be in 652 BCE. These mentions could of course have occurred in a martial hortatory elegy like fr. 1 West. But the possibility that they occurred in some narrative poem cannot be discounted, and that might indeed be thought more probable. It may also be that Callinus’s mention of the foundation of Hamaxitus in the Troad was found by Strabo (13.1.48 p. 604C = Callinus fr. 7 West) in a narrative poem (cf. Dougherty 1994: 37).

Such a narrative would explain the puzzling claim by Pausanias (9.9.3 = fr. 6 West) that Callinus mentioned the epic poem *Thebais* and ascribed it to Homer: a comparison of Callinus’s own poetic activity with that of the poet who sang both of Troy and of Thebes (without introducing what would be our earliest instance of the use of the name Homer) could explain Pausanias’s claim, and such a comparison would fit best in the prooemium of a narrative of war (cf. the opening of Simonides’ poem on Plataea, discussed below).²⁷ There may then have been a narrative poem of Callinus (precisely, perhaps, a *Sack of Sardis*) some of which handled material similar to that of Mimnermus’s *Smyrneis*. It is not impossible, as has recently been suggested (by Lulli 2008), that the “prayer to Zeus” known to Strabo (fr. 2 and 2a West) came from the opening of a narrative elegy, just as Simonides’ Plataea elegy begins with a protracted invocation to Achilles.

Sacadas

So far only one narrative elegy can be detected for the first half of the sixth century BCE, the *Sack of Troy* by Sacadas of Argos.²⁸ About the time of the restructuring of the Pythian Games in 586 BCE, Sacadas, a pipe (*aulos*) player and also a composer of elegies set to music,²⁹ composed and presumably accompanied in person a poem entitled *Sack of Troy* (*Iliou persis*). The testimony that yields its title also reveals that it had an extensive catalogue of the warriors in the horse.³⁰ Since several of the few warriors in the horse mentioned by Homer are Argive one might expect many of those in Sacadas’s version also to be from Argos. It seems likely that his poem included the episode of the theft of the Palladion, shortly before the sack, by

Diomedes and Odysseus, told in a version that was to the discredit of Odysseus. So far as we can know anything at all, then, the poem had an Argive spin; and although it handled a slice of Panhellenic mythology, it is manifestly a slice that was also a major episode in the early history of Argos and was important as an aetiology for the Argive cult of Athena. Like the two Archilochean elegies, therefore, despite being *prima facie* a narrative of an episode from general Hellenic mythology, it too may have been composed when and where it was because its subject was seen as part of the early history of Argos. That subject was nevertheless also part of the material handled by the hexameter poems of the epic cycle, and that the poem had such especially epic features as a catalogue is in no way surprising.

Xenophanes' *Foundation of Colophon and Migration to Elea in Italy*

We can reconstruct even less of Xenophanes' poem than of those of Tyrtaeus and Mimnermus, and it is valuable chiefly because it is the only one of these poems for which a later testimony offers not simply a title but also a length, 2,000 lines:

and he wrote in hexameters, and elegies, and *iamboi* against Hesiod and Homer, attacking what they said about the gods . . . and he also composed *Foundation of Colophon and the Migration to Elea in Italy*, 2,000 lines. (Diogenes Laertius 9.18–20)³¹

No fragment can be securely attributed, but we may guess that, as in Mimnermus fr. 9 West, there was some treatment of the migrants' arrival in Colophon.

It is also possible that Xenophanes fr. 3 West, describing the opulent self-presentation of the thousand-strong Colophonian elite on the eve of the Median conquest, may come from this work, though it is not ascribed to a specific poem by our source for the fragment, Athenaeus (526a):

And although the Colophonians, as Phylarchus says [*FGrH* 81 F66], were initially austere in their way of life, once they had established a friendship and military alliance with the Lydians and drifted into luxury, they used to go out with their hair adorned with golden jewellery; and indeed Xenophanes says:

But learning useless luxuries from the Lydians,
so long as they were without hateful tyranny,
they would go to their agora wearing robes that were all purple,
no fewer than a thousand overall,
proud, flaunting their beautiful locks,
drenching themselves with unguents with a *recherché* scent.
(Xenophanes fr. 3 West)

If these lines do come from this poem, their emphasis on the Colophonians' catching their luxurious habits from the Lydians suggests an unsurprising moral slant to

the philosopher Xenophanes' account of his city's turbulent recent history. As in Xenophanes fr. 2 West, then, which questions the value of athletic distinction, the *Foundation of Colophon and Migration to Elea in Italy* may have been a work whose later sections the poet was able to compose on the basis of his own autopsy and memory and in which he expressed disapproval of the values of an important section of his contemporaries. Such disapproval, if it was there, did not prevent its transmission, but that may have piggy-backed on his philosophical work, and we have no evidence either that the poem was later venerated in Elea (or elsewhere) or that it made any contribution to the account of the evacuation of Colophon offered by Herodotus (1.169): like the other Ionian elegists, Xenophanes is not even mentioned by Herodotus.

Panyassis' *Ionian History*

For our knowledge of the *Ionian History* of Panyassis of Halicarnassus we are dependent almost entirely on the Suda, which tells us that it dealt with Codrus, Neleus, and the Ionian colonies, in 7,000 lines.³² That it was an elegiac poem can be inferred from the Suda's statement that it was "in pentameters": a poem of any length, far less 7,000 lines, in pentameters alone would be extraordinary, either in the fifth century or even later in Greek literary history, whereas a very long elegiac poem on this subject is a natural development from the earlier accounts of the political and military history of individual cities. It is perhaps significant that whereas Panyassis chose hexameters, the standard epic meter, to handle the semi-mythical stories of Heracles, he chose elegiacs for this more "historical" subject.

The attributable fragments (at most three; see Matthews 1974) do not show whether Panyassis dealt with recent as well as foundation narratives, but his extension of his account to several cities (none of them his own, Halicarnassus) suggests that he was not setting out tendentiously to reinforce or counter any individual city's account of its own past. He may, of course, have tried to offer an overall explanation of how and why Ionian cities fell first under Lydian and then Medo-Persian control, and in doing so may have reflected the views of some Ionian friends that were not shared by all. It is lamentable that the work's almost complete disappearance prevents us from assessing whether in general themes or in details his account contributed to that in Book 1 of the prose history of his cousin Herodotus.

Simonides' Plataea poem

A different selection of time-span is found in Simonides' Plataea poem, entirely, as far as we can tell, devoted to the preliminaries and (presumably) to the actual battle of Plataea. Length too was perhaps perceptibly different, given that it could be accommodated on the same papyrus roll as at least one other battle-poem (that on Artemisium) and several shortish sympotic elegies:³³ it seems unlikely that it could

have been so long a poem as that of Mimnermus that was given the epicizing title *Smyrneis* and that seems to have been allocated its own book by Hellenistic editors, or even so long a poem as either part of Xenophanes' 2,000-line work (above). But the opening "hymn" to Achilles and proclamation of Homer's immortalizing of the Trojan War show that Simonides presented his poem as a successor of two species of hexameter poetry, the heroic narrative and the hymnic. As to its impact on the later historiographical tradition, some lines come so close to Herodotus's account as to suggest either that Herodotus used Simonides or they both drew on the same or closely related sources, but we have too little evidence to tell whether both are telling the story with a shared bias. Equally, however, Plutarch (*On the Mean-spiritedness of Herodotus* 872d–e) is not to be trusted in his assumption that the genre in which Simonides composed was one that guaranteed his lack of partisanship. That the details selected and the way they were told took account of the expected audience of the poem's first performances seems highly likely: at the same time it must have been Simonides' hope that his poem, like Homer's, would circulate widely and survive for many generations.

Conclusions Concerning Elegies of the Archaic and Classical Period

All these poems seem likely to have been based on oral traditions, usually "prose" (in the unmarked sense of that term that is used to indicate nothing more than that they were not sung, or in some form of verse), and to have made some contribution to the survival of those particular aspects of such traditions that they epicized in elegiac couplets. The use of "documents" or monuments is exemplified only in Tyrtaeus's "quotation" (in elegiacs) of an oracle from Delphi that was presumably originally (if it ever existed) in hexameters. That oracle may have been something that his first audience knew and that (just conceivably) even circulated in Sparta in written form. It is also possible that Xenophanes and Panyassis knew and drew upon earlier poems such as that of Mimnermus – given the subjects of their poems he would be an obvious source and model – but we have no evidence that they did. Nothing surviving from these poets unambiguously shows them handling myths related to the foundation of cults, such as were important material for fifth-century Attic tragedy and occasionally for *epinicia*, the poems praising athletic victors whose surviving examples were almost all composed by Pindar and Bacchylides in the first half of the fifth century; but, as said above, it is possible (albeit currently beyond any sort of testing) that Archilochus's *Deianeira* and *Telephus* were in some way related to performances associated with the cult of Heracles on Thasos. Whether this conjecture is true or false, it is hard to see how they could have much influenced, tendentially or otherwise, the Thasians' perception of the more recent history of their polis.

Regarding the poems that were devoted to recent military and political history, however, their composers could well have hoped to influence the perceptions both of their first audiences and of later generations. As in the case of Pindar, according

Table 9.1 Narrative elegies that might have been composed around 700, as well as elegies attested to have been composed around 650

c. 700 BCE	Clonas of Tegea ¹	Ardylos of Troizen	Meles of Colophon
	Resistance to the return of the Heraclidae; Echenus's duel with Hyllus; ² recent wars with Mantinea and Sparta	The arrival of Pittheus son of Pelops and recent wars with Argos	The foundation of Colophon and wars against Phrygian Midas
c. 650 BCE	Tyrtaeus of Sparta	Semonides of Amorgos	Mimnermus of Smyrna/Colophon
	<i>Eunomia</i> (the Heraclids' arrival in Laconia and Theopompus' conquest of Messenia)	<i>The early history of Samos</i> <and conquest of Amorgos?>	<i>Smyrneis</i> (the foundation of Smyrna and wars against Gyges)
		<i>Heracles and Deianeira, Heracles and Telephus</i>	<i>Hymn to Zeus</i> (? on Smyrna's origins and epicized war with Cimmerioi)

Notes

- 1 See [Plut.] *On music* 1133ab for attestation of all three of these as *auloidoi*, musicians who sang to the accompaniment of the pipe (*aulos*).
- 2 Cf. Hdt 9.26.4.

to his self-presentation in *Isthmian* 7.16–19, one objective of these poets was to combat the inclination of mortals to forget and that of recognition (*charis*) to sleep,³⁴ and they attempted to immortalize the renown (*kleos*) of their own generation or of the two generations immediately preceding them by recounting their military prowess (and, in Tyrtaeus's case, their political sagacity, *euboulia*), and perhaps by linking it with that of the city's founders or of the first generation of its settlers (who may well be the same people). The hour-glass shape that this may have given some of these poems – and that became the predominant profile for local prose historiography – is not merely a consequence of their own or their contemporaries' ignorance of the deeds of intervening generations. Their major focus was the immediate past: the distant past was there to help mythicize the immediate past, and that mythicization necessarily entailed forgetting the deeds of earlier and quite probably equally embattled generations.

It is a corollary that just as there were almost certainly sympotic elegies, lyric songs, and iambs in the generations before Archilochus, Callinus, Tyrtaeus, and Mimnermus (all composing around 650 BCE), so too there were already very probably also longer “narrative” elegies. As a thought-experiment I offer a tabular presentation (Table 9.1) of narrative elegies that *might* have been composed around 700 (all fictitious and unattested) as well as of elegies attested to have been composed around 650.

Let me emphasize again that the titles of the poems in the upper half of this table are entirely imaginary. The names of their poets, of course, are not, but are those of known pipe-players of that generation, one of whom, Meles, gave to his son the name Polymnestus, a name that might suggest a familial interest in the perpetuation of remembrance (*mnēmē*).

If these or similar “narrative” elegiac poems existed, what happened to them? Like the shorter sympotic poems sung by these same poets and without doubt by numerous contemporaries, they were composed too early to benefit from the graphic habit, the fashion of setting down poetry (sung, intoned, or simply spoken) in writing. Largely for this reason, they were superseded in performance contexts by the poetry of the 650s generation, poetry that was lucky enough to defy the natural obsolescence of praise-poetry by being captured in written texts. (I regard this obsolescence as “natural” because the reasons for recognizing the achievements of its subjects fade with the passage of time.) Of course either a family or a city might have had reasons for attempting to perpetuate an elegiac poem that commemorated the achievements of an individual or of the community. Such poems, however, would have been as susceptible to reworking by successive performers as was hexameter epic poetry (with which it shared both metrical and linguistic features); and if any had been composed around (say) 700 BCE (as imagined above), or indeed a generation or more earlier (which is in principle quite possible: we have no way of knowing when elegiac poems either shorter or longer began to be sung in the Greek world), the versions still being sung around 670–650 would be likely to have been in many ways different from the originals if their transmission had been exclusively oral. That we have some names of poets before the generation of Archilochus and

Callinus but no hint of the subject-matter of their poems seems to me an indication, albeit slight, that these poems were no longer in circulation when writing started to be used for recording poetry.

Whose Collective Memory?

One further question deserves mention before leaving archaic elegy. Whose perspective should we expect these poems to be presenting? It may, of course, be wrong to think of all these musicians and poets as coming from the same stratum in society, but the majority seems to have been drawn from the political elite. Archilochus was certainly from the elite of Paros and Thasos; Mimnermus talks as if his witnesses to the valor of a warrior of the immediately preceding generation are his equals (fr. 14 West) and uses the first person plural to align himself with the leading settlers of Colophon (fr. 9 West); and Tyrtaeus likewise uses the first person plural of the Heraclid arrival in Sparta, as Strabo observed (8.4.10 p. 362C, quoting fr. 2 West). Moreover it is certain that Callinus and Tyrtaeus, and possibly Archilochus, were also composers of shorter, martial hortatory elegies for sympotic performance (for which see Bowie 1990). It is therefore overwhelmingly probable that Callinus and Tyrtaeus were also members of the elite, the stratum of Greek society where sympotic culture first became established and below which it is unlikely yet to have trickled down in the seventh century. In the composers of these longer elegies, then, we have members of the elite who are at the same time distinguishing themselves as composers of martial hortatory elegies.³⁵ Their version of both early and of recent history (*palaia kai kaina*, in the phraseology of Herodotus 9.2.6) will surely have been focused through elite eyes – perhaps, like accounts offered by Alcaeus in lyric, a version that was sometimes (especially if aimed at sympotic audiences) focused more narrowly through the eyes of their own clans and their allies' clans; sometimes, perhaps, especially in the case of the more public narrative elegy, sung at a civic festival, it may have been a version more hospitable to the traditions of other segments of the city elite.

Appendix

To help bring out the unusual features of archaic narrative elegy, I review briefly the different relation to history that is evident in three examples of post-Homeric hexameter narrative: the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*, poems of the “epic cycle,” and the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes.³⁶

The Hesiodic Catalogue of Women

The publication in the twentieth century of numerous papyri, some (albeit fragmentary) offering long stretches of hexameters, often assignable to a particular

book of the five-book Hellenistic edition, has allowed much more to be said with some confidence about the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*, and scholarship in the last 30 years has cast much new light and defined many problems.³⁷ Like the *Theogony* and Homeric epic, the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* narrates the actions of gods and goddesses, heroes and women of the heroic age, but, as in some elegiac narratives, the heroes who are its subjects and the genealogies into which they are incorporated are likely to have had special significance for the claims made by some cities as a whole or by certain elite groups within them.³⁸ This is a feature that (unsurprisingly) was to be carried on into Greek (and Latin) prose historiography. By contrast with some early elegiac and with prose historiographical narratives, however, the poet or poets of the *Catalogue of Women* give no sign of having conducted any enquiry to establish the truth of what they sing.³⁹ Given that their subject is located largely in “mythical” time, it is predictable enough that appeal is made not to older generations but to the Muses (cf. fr. 1.1–5 Merkelbach-West) as purveyors of information. But together with this goes a rarity of insistence that the poet’s own version is true whereas those of others are false,⁴⁰ and a remarkable neglect of chronological sequence in favor of organization of material by genealogical stemmata: the most striking example of this is the order in which episodes in the life of Heracles are narrated, with the end of his life near the beginning of the poem, in Book 1, and his birth towards its end, in Book 5 (see Haubold 2005). To some degree this, and some other peculiar features of the poem, are attributable to its choice of stemmatic organization. That principle was also adopted by Hecataeus of Miletus (*FGrH* 1) around the end of the sixth century in his four-book *Genealogies* (*Genealogiai*) – which is one of several aspects of that work that count against any claims that it might have been an important ancestor or even antecedent of Herodotean and Thucydidean historiography.⁴¹

The “Epic Cycle”

By contrast with the Hesiodic *Catalogue* the several hexameter epics of the Archaic period, usually termed “the epic cycle,” have not been greatly illuminated by papyrus finds over the last century. Attempts to add to what we already knew about them from the summaries of the late antique scholar Proclus (themselves mediated for us by the summary offered by Photius in his eighth-century CE “Library” [*Bibliotheca*]) have inevitably been vulnerable to criticism. It is possible that one of them, the *Corinthian Narratives* (*Korinthiaka*) of Eumelus of Corinth, presented elements in the history of Corinth that included both the recent past (about which questions could be asked and versions debated) and the more distant, “mythological” past. But whereas it is possible to discern geographical areas of interest,⁴² we cannot pin down anything comparable to the elegists’ account of events of their own and immediately preceding generations. The other poets of the “cycle” are given origins in different parts of the Greek world in ancient quotations and discussions (for instance, Lesches is said to have been from Mytilene, Stasinus from Cyprus) but

nowhere in their fragments or in Proclus's summaries of their poems is there any evidence that these displayed an interest in the history of their cities.

The Argonautica of Apollonius of Rhodes

A very brief glance at a hexameter epic poet of the third century BCE, Apollonius of Rhodes, shows how different the relation of a poet of literary epic to his "sources" was. It is most likely that for the overall plot of the Argonauts' quest for the golden fleece and for some details of its elaboration Apollonius drew on earlier poetic and prose accounts. Poetic accounts included an earlier *Argonautica*, treatments of Medea in the Corinthian poetry of Eumelus and in Attic tragedy, and Homer's own treatment of the rulers of Scheria, Alcinous and Arete. Of the numerous myths for which Apollonius seems to have drawn on local histories written in prose I mention only two examples. First, a version of the Hylas myth associated with Bithynian Cios (told in *Argonautica* 1.1187–357) may have come to him from the Lesbian historian of the fifth century BCE, Hellanicus.⁴³ Second, his account of un-Greek burial practices in Colchis at 3.200–9 was drawn, according to a scholiast, from a third-century historian, Nymphodorus, probably from Amphipolis (Hunter 1989: 119–20 on lines 200–9). We may note how in a roughly contemporary elegiac poem in which its poet thought it legitimate to disclose his sources, the *Explanations* (*Aitia*), Callimachus, a kindred spirit, explicitly acknowledges the local prose historian Xenomedes of Ceos as his source for the story of Acontius and Cydippe (fr. 75.53–77 Pfeiffer).

Manifestly Apollonius (aided by Apollo and the Muses) also "made up" much detail, introducing variants of the myths as told by predecessors and supplying speeches and (inevitably) the scenes in which they are delivered.⁴⁴ It is not impossible that on occasion he visited a place on the route of the Argonauts and used enquiry (in Herodotus's terminology, *historiē*) to supplement what he had read in his own library and in the great library of Alexandria. So far as I know we have not a shred of evidence that either he or Callimachus did any such oral field-work. But items of local knowledge may still have reached Apollonius and Callimachus by oral communication: the symposium held in Alexandria by the Athenian Pollis, narrated in Callimachus fr. 178 Pfeiffer, in which the poet interrogates a visitor called Theogenes about customs on his native island of Icos, may well be fictitious,⁴⁵ but the paradigm it illustrates, of the dissemination of knowledge in the symposia of cultivated men, is very likely to reflect cultural reality.

The relation to his sources, then, of the "literary" epic poet Apollonius is quite different from that of the archaic elegiac poets to theirs,⁴⁶ though reflection on how much he simply "made up" is a helpful reminder that this must have been true of much early narrative elegy too.

In relation to his readership Apollonius is also very different: he surely expected a readership far-flung geographically and hoped for one throughout succeeding generations. But one respect in which he may have resembled the archaic elegists is

that he chose to handle his heroes in a way that may well be carefully calculated to convey messages about what was desirable in political and military leadership in his own time.⁴⁷

Notes

- 1 I have earlier addressed aspects of this question in Bowie 1986: 27–35 and Bowie 2001. This chapter tries to take account of new arguments and fresh evidence (e.g., Simonides' Plataea poem, published in 1992, and Archilochus's Telephus poem, published in 2005). Earlier discussions include Schmid 1947 and Lasserre 1976; only recently was it brought to my attention (by Dr Laura Lulli) that Mazzarino 1966: 37–46 had already discussed anticipation of historiographical subject-matter and method by Callinus and Mimnermus. Among contributions since 1986, Dougherty 1994 and Sider 2006 are both important. Sider makes a persuasive case that Hellenistic editions and later citations of early elegists show no evidence that a separate genre of "historical elegy" was recognized in the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman periods. This cannot, however, tell us whether in the Archaic period longer elegies (which at some stage acquired titles) were perceived as different from those elegies characteristically sung in a symposium. I agree that it does not seem likely that such longer elegies were devoted only to historical subjects, or were exclusively narrative, and neither in 1986 nor in 2001 did I use the term "historical elegy" (my term in 1986: 33 is "a genre of narrative elegy dealing with local history"). Nor, *pace* Dougherty 1994: 35 n. 1, did I in 1986 suggest that *ktisis*/foundation was the sole or even pre-eminent subject matter of the elegies I discussed.

All translations are my own. Suda entries are cited from Adler's edition (1928–38); Hesiod's fragments after Merkelbach and West 1967; elegiac and iambic fragments after West 1971–92, and Callimachus after Pfeiffer 1949–53. *FGrH* = Jacoby 1923–98.

- 2 Suda *sigma* 431 Adler, which is agreed to be largely an entry on Semonides (as also *sigma* 446 Adler) and not, as it starts off as being, on Simmias of Rhodes; cf. Bowie 1986 and 2001.
- 3 As most think, e.g., van Wees 1999: 1–14.
- 4 Lines 1–6 are also quoted early in the second century CE by Plutarch in his *Life of Lycurgus* 6.
- 5 Other features, e.g., the mention of the Heraclids and the consultation of oracles, may have been felt to contribute to epic color; even, perhaps, the term *eunomia*, "good order," if it figured prominently at some point in the poem, as its (presumably) later use as a title might suggest; for implicit Homeric praise of *eunomia*, cf. *Odyssey* 17.487.
- 6 The prominence of Theopompus in Tyrtaeus's account of the conquest of Messenia (fr. 5 West) is one of the reasons for accepting Plutarch's presentation of the consultation of the Delphic oracle as having been undertaken by Theopompus and Polydorus: for a different view, see van Wees 1999.
- 7 The translation I offer here is of the corrupt line as usually supplemented by Bach in his edition of 1831 by the Greek term *skolion* ("crooked"): for an argument against this supplement, proposing that the sense of the line was "but no longer plot against this city," see van Wees 1999: 9–11.
- 8 Cf. Mimnermus fr. 14 West (discussed below).

- 9 Even if the demand for redistribution of land mentioned by Aristotle (cf. above) belongs to the Messenian conquest of two generations before Tyrtaeus's time it is highly probable that the Messenian war of Tyrtaeus's own generation (for which cf. Strabo 8.4.10 p.362C = fr. 8 West) generated political tensions in Sparta: cf. van Wees 1999.
- 10 It is also possible that the sequence of fr. 2 West comes from a speech delivered by a character in the narrative (for such speeches in early narrative elegy, cf. Mimnermus fr. 13a West), but the adoption of a first-person stance in which the poet aligns himself with his (*polis*?) audience is also found in the possessive adjective "our" (*hēmeteroi*) at the beginning of fr. 5.1 West. The combination of battle narrative, exhortation and foregrounding of the poet's identity also seems to have characterized Archilochus's long poems in trochaic tetrameters (fr. 88–115 West).
- 11 That Lycurgus did not figure in the poetry of Tyrtaeus seems to me virtually certain: if he had done so, later writers eager to acquire "information" about Lycurgus (such as Plutarch) would surely have chosen to cite Tyrtaeus.
- 12 On Aristomenes, see Ogden 2004. An early narrative elegy about the deeds of Aristomenes may be the source of *adespota elegiaca* fr. 17 West, quoted by Pausanias 4.16.6 as from "a song still sung in our day": "to the middle of the Stenyclarus plain, and to the top of the mountain, Aristomenes followed the Lacedaemonians." For refutation of the view that this couplet must be Hellenistic, see Sider 2006: 33 n. 30. Pausanias' belief that it was part of a song performed by a female chorus on Aristomenes' return from battle may rest on lines of the poem he does not cite, but if he were simply relying on local oral tradition or indeed on a contemporary mode of performance we are not compelled to accept that this was indeed its original mode of performance.
- 13 For a recent discussion of the transmission, see van Wees 1999: 14–26.
- 14 See more fully Bowie 1986 and 2001. Mimnermus's floruit is dated to 632–620 BCE by the Suda, but the ancient scholarly debate as to whether Mimnermus, Callinus, or Archilochus "invented" the elegiac couplet shows that earlier dates were also offered in antiquity.
- 15 By a commentary on Antimachus of Colophon preserved on a papyrus now in Milan, *Papyri Universitatis Mediolanensis* 17 col. ii 26.
- 16 Sider 2006: 334 attractively suggests that his introduction of the two generations of Muses "was couched in such a way as to look forward to the passage of generations in the history of Smyrna."
- 17 *Iliad* 4.370–400. Grethlein 2007 offers a different interpretation, following Meineke in reading in line 2 the singular of the masculine relative pronoun *hos* (with a first person antecedent, "I") instead of the plural of the masculine relative pronoun *hoi* (with a third person antecedent, "my forebears"). In either case *some* reference (negative or positive) is made to information derived from an earlier generation in lines 1–2. For a fuller discussion of the problem see Bowie forthcoming c.
- 18 See, e.g., Cameron 1995: 311 with earlier literature in n. 46. Contra, e.g., Müller 1988; Dougherty 1994: 39.
- 19 Attested by an inscription of the first century CE, *CIG* 3376 = *ISmyrna* 1 (= *ISGK* 23) 215.
- 20 The fragments are 286 West (Dio Chrysostomus 60.1), 287 West (Schol. *BE ⁴ *Iliad* 21.237), 288 West (Scholion on Apollonius of Rhodes 1.1212–19), and perhaps 289 West (Plutarch, *On the Meanness of Herodotus* 14 = *Moralia* 857F); the reference in Ps.-Longinus is 33.4–5.
- 21 The *editio princeps* was by Obbink 2005. For general discussion and debate over supplements see Bernsdorff 2006; D'Alessio 2006; Luppe 2006; Magnelli 2006; Obbink 2006; West 2006.

- 22 “We two know how to flee at once” or “we know how to flee from other woes.” The first of these, involving the dual “we two,” *nōi*, would anchor the narration of the myth in a performance context in which the poem was ostensibly addressed to a single individual (cf. fr. 13 and 48 West, discussed above), i.e., almost certainly a symposium. The second would leave a public context of performance possible. The verb *epistamai* (“I know”) appears twice in Archilochus in a participial form, *epistamenos* (“knowing”), at fr. 1.2 West and *adespota elegiaca* fr. 61.10 West, and twice in the form *epistamai* (“I know”) at fr. 23.14 and 126.1 West. For the other possible supplement [*edexam*]*eth*’ (“we are told/have received as a tradition”), cf. Simonides fr 11.16 West.
- 23 It should be noted that even the phrase *kai pot[e]* (“and once”), which Chris Carey has rightly pointed out to me might suggest a transition to the narration of an *exemplum*, is not secure (Luppe 2006, for example, offers a different reading of the traces on the papyrus).
- 24 I shall argue in Bowie forthcoming b that Stobaeus 4.10.10 (*adespota elegiaca* fr. 24 West) preserves a pentameter from this poem (misascribed by Stobaeus to Euripides) and that Stobaeus’s phrase “from the *Telephus*” (*ek Telephou*) is evidence for our elegiac poem having circulated with the title *Telephus*.
- 25 That may, however, have been the content of *adespota elegiaca* fr. 61 West (= Oxyrhynchus papyrus 2507), identified as Archilochus by Henry 1998: there are past tenses (lines 11 and 14) but the fragment’s 14 lines are neither long nor complete enough to determine whether it was a part of an extended narrative.
- 26 Fr. 5(a) and (b) West; cf. fr. 4 West, from Stephanus of Byzantium 634.3 Meineke.
- 27 For further discussion see Bowie forthcoming c. The suggestion that this claim was in a proem and was like that of Simonides is made independently by Sider 2006: 336.
- 28 For a full discussion of Sacadas see Bowie forthcoming a.
- 29 Ps-Plutarch, *On music* 1134a (cf. 1134c): “Sacadas of Argos was also a composer of lyric poems and of elegies set to music, and was himself also a good pipe-player, and is recorded as having won the Pythian competition three times.”
- 30 Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 13.610C (Cynulcus is speaking): “and if someone were to ask you who were the men who were shut up in the wooden horse, you will be able to name one and perhaps a second. And you would not be able to do even this on the basis of Stesichorus, for you would find it difficult, but on the basis of the *Sack of Troy* of Sacadas of Argos. For he catalogued very many men.” The chief manuscript of Athenaeus (A) here has the genitive *Sacata* which Casaubon emended to *Sacadou* or *Sacada*, a correction accepted by Schweighäuser and later editors of Athenaeus.
- 31 Diogenes Laertius is writing in the second or third century CE.
- 32 The entry in the Suda, *pi* 248 Adler, runs as follows: “Panyassis of Halicarnassus, interpreter of prodigies and dactylic poet, who restored poetry when it had been extinguished . . . He is recorded as having been the cousin (*exadelphos*) of the historian Herodotus: for Panyassis was son of Polyarchus, and Herodotus the son of Lyxes the brother of Polyarchus . . . Panyassis belongs in the 78th Olympiad [468–465 BCE], and according to some much earlier. For he was alive during the Persian Wars. He was put to death by Lygdamis, the third tyrant of Halicarnassus. Among poets he is ranked after Homer, and according to some after Hesiod and Antimachus. He wrote a *Heracleia* in 14 books running to 9,000 lines, and an *Ionian History*, in pentameters, dealing with Codrus, Neleus, and the Ionian colonies, running to 7,000 lines.”
- 33 For full discussions of the text and the numerous issues it raises, see Boedeker and Sider 2001; Kowerski 2005.

- 34 “But the fact is that recognition of things in the past sleeps, and mortals are forgetful, of what does not reach the peak of skill’s perfection when yoked to the renowned streams of poetry,” Pindar, *Isthmian* 7.16–19.
- 35 That in at least some cases they themselves played the pipe (*aulos*) unaccompanied, as well as being skilled at singing to its accompaniment, does not seem to me to count against their membership of the political elite in this period, as it would do at a later period when pipe-players were “professionals.”
- 36 The case of the Homeric poems themselves is addressed by Jonas Grethlein, this volume.
- 37 Note especially West 1985; Dräger 1992, 1997, and the valuable collection of papers in Hunter 2005.
- 38 There is debate, however, on which: the question is part of the wider problem of the date and location of our (or an earlier) version of the *Catalogue*. Whereas Janko 1983 argued for an early date, close to that of the *Theogony*, and is followed by (e.g.) Osborne 2005, West 1985 made a strong case for a mid-sixth-century date (accepted, e.g., by Irwin 2005).
- 39 Although the *Catalogue* represents itself as a continuation of the *Theogony*, the opening of which (27–32) had problematized issues of truth in mythological song, there is no indication (at least in our surviving lines) that the *Catalogue* revisited this problem.
- 40 Perhaps fr. 23 Merkelbach-West, where the Iphigeneia who is sacrificed (a version of other singers?) turns out merely to be a phantom (*eidōlon*), whereas “she herself” was carried off by a god. For the trope, cf. Heracles in the underworld in *Odyssey* 11.601–2.
- 41 Herodotus’s scorn for Hecataeus’s genealogical approach can be perceived in his remarks about Hecataeus “genealogizing himself” in Egypt (2.143).
- 42 E.g., the western Mediterranean, as argued by Debiasi 2004.
- 43 Cf. *FGrH* 4 F131, though some details may perhaps have been offered by the poet Cinaithon; cf. the scholiast on the *Argonautica* 1.1355. For further illustration and pertinent remarks on the implication of Apollonius’s working with prose sources and in a library, see Hunter 2001: 94–8.
- 44 This had of course been a feature of Greek hexameter epic poetry from as early as we know it, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: see Bowie 1993.
- 45 For discussion (with references to earlier scholarship) see Fantuzzi and Hunter 2004: 76–83.
- 46 And *a fortiori* from that of archaic epic poets after Homer, but there is no space here to handle these too.
- 47 For persuasive arguments for this thesis see Mori 2008.

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Fact, Fiction, and Form in Early Roman Epic

SANDER M. GOLDBERG

The career of Gaius Marius was by any measure extraordinary: his seven consulships and notable military successes are but part of a long, famous story of brilliance and cruelty, victory and defeat, as Roman society accelerated the sequence of social upheavals and personal rivalries that ultimately destroyed the Republic. Marius's role in those momentous events became the stuff of legend, and in the early 50s BCE Cicero, another self-made man from the same town of Arpinum, wrote a hexameter poem about Marius that no doubt helped the legend along. The poem does not survive, but we know that Cicero embellished Marius's story with the description of two omens: seven eaglets that fell into his lap when he was a young man in Arpinum represented the seven consulships to come, and an eagle's horrendous struggle with a snake in its talons was seen to foreshadow his revenge on the false friends of his old age.¹

Cicero recalls this exercise in myth-making a few years later in the opening scene of *De Legibus*, the Platonic dialogue on justice and law that he sets in his native town. The two brothers Marcus and Quintus Cicero and their friend Pomponius Atticus are walking in the country.² Atticus sees an immense oak and wonders if this could be the very tree from which the seven eaglets fell into Marius's lap. Quintus Cicero doubts it. No farmer, he says, planted that famous tree: its origin lay in a poet's genius. And appropriately so. Poetry should not be false, as Marcus soon adds, but neither should we expect it to be true in the same sense that history is true, a fact that Quintus himself must acknowledge. History and poetry are two different endeavors (*Leg.* 1.5):

QVINTVS: Intellego te, frater, alias in historia leges obseruandas putare, alias in poemate.

MARCVS: Quippe cum in illa ad ueritatem <omnia>, Quinte, referantur, in hoc ad delectationem pleraque; quamquam et apud Herodotum, patrem historiae, et apud Theopompum sunt innumerabiles fabulae.

- QVINTVS: I understand, brother, that you think one set of rules is to be observed in history and another set in poetry.
- MARCVS: Indeed, Quintus, since in the former everything is measured by truth and in the latter much has to do with pleasure, although there are countless stories in Herodotus, the father of history, and in Theopompus.

Cicero alludes here to what was already a venerable debate over the rival jurisdictions of poetry and history, though by his day Romans were coming to accept the view that would be made famous a generation later by the historian Livy, viz. that the poetic embellishments of ancient tradition were the historians' task neither to affirm nor refute.³ Two famous Livian examples of that license, King Numa's edifying conversations with the nymph Egeria and the cap that an eagle dropped on the first Tarquin's head to signal his coming distinction, are already the examples used in *De Legibus* to make this very point about fictional embellishment.

What may seem a little startling is not that Cicero should make that argument here in the late 50s, but that poetic license has so contemporary a reach. As Atticus points out in the dialogue, Marius was barely a generation dead when Cicero, who had actually seen and heard the great man in his old age, began fostering these legends about him.⁴ Yet there is precedent for the mythologizing of living memory, and some of that precedent was of Cicero's own making. Over a hundred years earlier, the poet Ennius, the inventor of hexameter epic in Latin, had already narrowed the gap between epic time and historical time by describing the exploits of contemporary figures in self-consciously Homeric language, and Cicero continued, or perhaps even extended, that practice into his own time by attaching what was in origin a Homeric omen – his eagle clutching the snake is modeled on the sign at *Iliad* 12.200–5 – to the story of Marius.⁵ Poetry demands such embellishment, or so poets would claim, and even before the *Marius*, Cicero had done the same in a hexameter poem he wrote celebrating his own consulship, a poem which included a divine assembly on Olympus to which the consul was himself summoned. Reception of that poem (and its exploitation of epic conventions) was, to say the least, mixed. What may have originated innocently enough in an amalgamation of poetic and historical values was too easily read by contemporaries as a product not of art but of ego.⁶

Modern students of historiography are actually better placed than critics of literature to understand what Cicero thought he was doing in such an extraordinary poem and why he thought he could get away with it. Growing recognition – and acceptance – of the fact that the ancient style of writing history contained a strong literary component not just defines common ground between historians and poets but warns that the line between history and poetry was neither clear nor straight. The resulting change in the scholarly horizon has been especially good for the reputation of Livy, no longer faulted as a credulous storyteller or lightweight Polybius, but the study of republican authors is not unaffected. We might well suspect that Cicero's invocation of laws that separate history and poetry is somewhat disingenuous, and his own writings confirm that suspicion. In the very year (55 BCE) in which he spelled out the laws of history in *De Oratore* – not to write

anything false, to say everything that is true, and to avoid both partiality and animosity – he urged the historian Lucius Lucceius to bend those laws in his favor when writing a history of his consulship.⁷ Lucceius, as far as we know, never wrote that history, and so we cannot say what features it might have shared with Cicero's notorious poem. There are, however, other available indications of poetry's close relation to history in the republican period.

It is important at the outset to say "poetry" broadly and not "epic" narrowly. Epic was not the only, and certainly not the first, poetic genre at Rome to entwine itself with the record of history. Nor could epic claim, at least not originally, the primacy among Romans that it enjoyed among Greeks. In Roman literature's early days, there was no epic poet to set the poets' table, as Homer was famously said to have done for Aeschylus. Roman poets were dramatists before they were epicists, and history was part of Roman drama from almost the beginning. The first poet to write a historical epic in Latin (Naevius) also created the genre of historical plays that later Romans called *praetextae*, while Ennius, who made his reputation as a tragedian before putting the history of Rome in Homeric hexameters, wrote a play on the consul Fulvius Nobilior's victory at Ambracia in 189 that almost certainly figured in the controversy over Nobilior's triumph and subsequent election to the censorship. The *praetexta* genre is poorly attested and badly understood, but it was very likely a major source of popular knowledge of Roman traditions and Roman achievements.⁸ Poetry and History met early, easily, and memorably on the public stages of Rome, and while epic inevitably seizes our attention, we must remember that a fuller knowledge of the second-century cultural scene would necessitate a somewhat different story.

A second necessity is recognition that what Roman poets did was the result of conscious, calculated decisions. They worked from extensive knowledge of what their Greek predecessors had done in the fields of epic and drama and also knew from Greek examples what "literature" could do for fostering civic ideology and national identity. That self-consciousness was their virtue. Roman poets, as heirs to old Greek traditions even as they founded new Latin ones, put the past to work for the present and in the process set a clear course for the future. That did not happen by accident. Though we may no longer say with the confidence of old that the beginning of Roman literature came in 240 BCE when a Greek freedman named Livius Andronicus produced a comedy and a tragedy for the *ludi Romani*, Andronicus *did* undertake those commissions at the Senate's request and something about the Roman attitude toward texts *did* begin to change in consequence. There was verbal art before Andronicus, but verbal art was not the same after him. By some point in the later second century, Romans had grasped the utility of poetry as an instrument of social definition, and by the time of Cicero, what the third-century pioneers had produced was certainly thought of as "literature," i.e. texts marked if not always by artistic merit, then certainly by the attention subsequent generations paid to them.⁹

Recent explorations of this process tend to focus on Quintus Ennius and his *Annales*, 18 books of hexameter verse telling Rome's story from the arrival of Aeneas in Italy to the Illyrian campaigns of the late 180s.¹⁰ That focus is understandable.

Ennius's extensive aristocratic connections are well documented, if not well understood, and his masterful embrace of the Homeric model did not just make his poem *the* republican epic, but clearly aimed to give the Roman achievements it described an epic stature. He boasted of having brought Rome's poetry to a new level of sophistication by supplanting the kind of verses "Fauns and soothsayers sang" with his new Latin version of Homer's meter, the dactylic hexameter. The immediate target of this polemic was the first historical epic in Latin, Gnaeus Naevius's poem about the First Punic War, which was written in the Saturnian verse long associated at Rome with ritual contexts. Ennius's "improvements" consigned his predecessor's own innovation to the scrap-heap of failed experiments.¹¹ The changes he wrought ultimately proved to be good for subsequent Latin poetry – Vergil's innovations developed from Ennian innovations – and also for the Roman aristocrats who found their deeds so remarkably ennobled.¹² But this is not the whole story. Naevius's *Bellum Punicum* did not vanish as soon as Ennius came on the scene: it was still being read in Horace's day. Nor was Ennius's epic an immediate classic. It did not at once supplant older forms of poetic expression or single-handedly define poetry's relationship to history.¹³ Other texts and other forms, alternatives to the Ennian formulation, therefore demand attention as we seek to understand the evolving relationship of early Roman epic to the historical record.

Not all the available evidence is literary, and it is in fact the relationship between literary and non-literary testimony that is particularly important. The most obvious point of contact is the so-called Saturnian verse itself. We know this meter only from a limited number of epitaphs and public inscriptions, and a few dozen fragments of hymns and epics. Neither its origin (native to Italy or an early Greek import?) nor its governing principles are fully understood. Nor is the corpus of Saturnian verses completely secure. Typical of the problem we face in defining the canon is a small stone found in Rome on the Caelian Hill, which records the consul Mummius's triumph over Corinth in 146 BCE and his dedication of a shrine to Hercules. A diplomatic transcript of the inscription looks something like this:

L. MUMMI(US) L. F. COS. DUCT(U)
 A U S P I C I O I M P E R I O Q U E
 E I U S A C H A I A C A P T (A), C O R I N T O
 D E L E T O R O M A M R E D I E I T
 T R I U M P H A N S . O B H A S C E
 R E S B E N E G E S T A S, Q U O D
 I N B E L L O V O V E R A T,
 H A N C A E D E M E T S I G N U (M)
 H E R C U L I S V I C T O R I S
 I M P E R A T O R D E D I C A T.

L. Mummius son of Lucius, consul, under whose leadership, auspices and command Achaia was captured, Corinth destroyed, returned to Rome in triumph. For these things successfully done, what he vowed on campaign, this temple and statue of Hercules the Victor, the commander dedicates.

The style of this inscription, with its terse ablative strings at the beginning and short clauses throughout, is well attested in the Roman honorific tradition and was already sufficiently familiar by the late third century that Plautus could parody it to good effect in his *Amphitruo*:

id vi et virtute militum victum atque expugnatum oppidum est
imperio atque auspicio mei eri Amphitruonis maxime . . .

The town was conquered and sacked by strength and soldierly skill,
under the command and auspices of my master Amphitryon especially . . .
(191–2)

Yet the form Mummius's declaration takes is not so clear. In the late nineteenth century, the editor Franz Bücheler somewhat reluctantly accepted the possibility of Saturnian rhythms after the initial heading (*titulus*) of this text, and that part of the inscription therefore found its way into his widely cited anthology of *Carmina Latina Epigraphica* looking like this.¹⁴

Duct(u) auspicio imperioque eius Achaia capt(a),
Corinto deleto Romam redieit triumphans.
ob hasce res bene gestas, quod in bello voverat,
hanc aedem et signu(m) Herculis Victoris
imperator dedicat.

There is now some agreement, though, that for technical reasons of length and proportion these particular lines make extremely dubious Saturnians.¹⁵ Authentic Saturnian lines are composed of two unequal metrical phrases, or cola, the first colon slightly longer than the second and with certain tendencies observable in the position of the caesura that separates them. Bücheler himself recognized the impossibility of Saturnian cola in lines four and five, and the first two lines do not seem to respect one common nicety of the meter, the so-called *caesura Korschiana*, i.e., the preference in some 80 percent of probable Saturnians for a word boundary three (sometimes four) syllables before a colon division.

It is also important to consider how the inscription itself asks to be read. It is clear from the stone – printed versions of the text do not normally reproduce this fact – that Mummius's name and title are not easily detached from the “body” of the text.¹⁶ What catches our attention visually is the prominence of his name in slightly larger letters at the top of the stone and of “Herculis Victoris,” again in a larger size, near the bottom. Any first, casual glance detects not a pattern of verses, much less the calculated development of a poem, but a central message, “L. Mummius L. f. consul . . . aedem Herculis Victoris imperator dedicat.”

Early Saturnians are not so subtle. They generally announce themselves in a clear, though not always artful way. The first verse epitaph written for a Scipio, Lucius (cos. [consul] 258), is in Saturnians and gives a line to each verse. Though the Saturnian inscription later added to the famous sarcophagus of his father,

L. Cornelius Scipio Barbatus (cos. 298), was written with little regard for its arrangement in a pre-existing space (an earlier, prose inscription was erased), great care was taken to indicate the ends of its metrical lines with long dashes between verses, providing the earliest known example of metrical punctuation in a Latin text.¹⁷

Other examples are no less clear in their versification, though they can be much less monumental. The third-century inscription on the handle of the so-called Cista Ficoroni, a small bronze vessel found in a tomb near Praeneste (modern Palestrina), has one line on each side of its label. Blank spaces divide each of those lines quite clearly into cola, with subjects on one side of that divide and predicates on the other:¹⁸

Novios Plautios med (vac.) Romai fecid,
Dindia Malconia (vac.) fileai dedit.

Novios Plautios made me at Rome.
Dindia Malconia gave [me] to her daughter.

Yet Bücheler was not alone in the impulse to manufacture Saturnians. Ancient grammarians yielded to a similar temptation to expand the meager corpus of this deeply problematic verse form. The fourth-century grammarian Charisius mistook tragic anapests for Saturnians, and he was probably just repeating the mistake of an older source. Back in the first century CE, Caesius Bassus thought he recognized a Saturnian line in the inscription commemorating the victory of Aemilius Regillus at the battle of Myonnesus in 190: “duello magno dirimendo regibus subigendis” (“for ending a great war, for subduing kings”).¹⁹ The line at least conforms to the formal parameters of the verse – two cola of five to seven syllables, the first colon one or two syllables longer than the second, with word boundaries in the expected places – but as with Bücheler’s treatment of the Mummius dedication, context must give us pause.

The full inscription for Regillus adorned a temple to the Lares Permarini that was erected in fulfillment of his vow by his kinsman, the censor M. Aemilius Lepidus, in 179. Livy’s version of it, however lacunose, is clearly in prose, and there was no discernible reason for Livy to have made it so himself.²⁰

duello magno dirimendo, regibus subigendis, caput patrandae pacis haec pugna ex-
unti L. Aemilio M. Aemilii filio [. . .] auspicio imperio felicitate ductuque eius inter
Ephesum Samum Chiumque inspectante eos ipso Antiocho, exercitu omni, equitatu
elephantisque, classis regis Antiochi antehac invicta fusa contusa fugataque est, ibique
eo die naves longae cum omnibus sociis captae quadraginta duae. ea pugna pugnata
rex Antiochus regnumque [. . .] eius rei ergo aedem Laribus permarinis vovit.

For ending a great war, for subduing kings, as a way to establish peace, this battle
[was granted to] L. Aemilius, the son of M. Aemilius, when he took the field. Under
his auspices, command, good fortune, and leadership near Ephesus, Samos, and Chios,
while Antiochus himself watched them, the entire army, cavalry, and elephants, the fleet
of King Antiochus though previously undefeated was routed, shattered, and put to

flight, and on that same day 42 warships with all their crews were captured. With this fight fought, King Antiochus and his kingdom [were conquered]. For this victory he vowed a temple to the Lares of the Sea.

Nor is there a reason for the inscription to begin with a single line of verse that is neither semantically distinct (*caput patrandae pacis* completes the tricolon that begins with *duello magno dirimendo*) nor formally separate from what follows. (The significant grammatical boundary is after *pacis*, not *subigendis*.) Later prose authors did occasionally create metrical echoes at significant moments, but there is no precedent in Lepidus's dedication for the dactylic rhythm that begins Livy's preface, much less for the hexameter that is recognized at the beginning of Tacitus's *Annales*.²¹

Happily, that is not quite all the evidence we have. Somewhat more likely witnesses to triumphal inscriptions in Saturnians are a plausibly (though quite extensively) restored dedication recording the achievements of C. Sempronius Tuditanus, consul in 129 BCE, and a scholion to Cicero's speech for Archias, which reports that the poet Accius composed a Saturnian inscription for a temple of Mars erected by D. Iunius Brutus Callaicus to commemorate his campaigns of 138–136.²² Add that testimony to the incontrovertible evidence from funeral monuments, and some role for Saturnians in honorific contexts seems secure. But what connection should we imagine between honorific contexts and epic contexts?

Roman epic is often said to have been written first in Saturnians because of the meter's association with the celebratory and liturgical functions of priests and generals. Epic, the aristocrats' genre, thus assumed the rhythm that "was more or less explicitly linked to the dominant members of Roman society."²³ The problem with this explanation should be obvious but never actually attracts the attention it deserves: no honorific Saturnians and only the most erratic of ritual Saturnians pre-date the career of Naevius. What is early is either socially neutral, like Dindia Macolnia's label on the bronze pitcher she gave her daughter, or it is not really quite Saturnian. The oldest evidence is the most problematic. The archaic hymn of the Salian priests (*Carmen Saliare*) offers few clues to its rhythms, and the so-called Lapis Satricanus, a short dedication to Mars, probably from the late sixth century, that was found built into the foundation of a temple at Satricum in Latium, offers none at all (*pace* Habinek 2005: 37–8). The best that can be said of our most important piece of evidence, the Hymn of the Arval Brethren, which is certainly quite old, is that it is "mainly written in cola which later crystallized into the Saturnian metre."²⁴ That, I suspect, is the key: it may in fact be the epic poets who did the crystallizing. The great antiquity of the Saturnian as a distinct metrical form is certainly the Roman antiquaries' presumption. It is much less certainly a historical fact. What Ennius's Fauns and seers sang was quite probably more like the Arval Hymn than the *Bellum Punicum*; his reference to Naevius contains more literary polemic than literary history.²⁵

Other seemingly old Saturnians reinforce this suspicion. The archaic *sententiae* attributed to the hoary Appius Claudius Caecus and the mysterious Gnaeus Marcius clearly come to us through a first-century filter. The earliest of the Scipionic verse

inscriptions, that of Barbatus's son Lucius (cos. 259), is usually dated after 205 BCE, which at best puts it in Naevius's lifetime, and the similar funerary *elogium* of Atilius Caiatinus, known only through Cicero's quotation of its opening lines, is more likely to recall than to precede the Scipionic examples.²⁶ Everything else is later, and not all of it is aristocratic by any means. The good-humored, boastful dedication of the cooks' guild of Falerii makes that abundantly clear, and to dismiss its testimony because the verses are irregular in their meter and may even confuse Saturnian and elegiac features only begs the question.²⁷

The connotations of Naevius's epic style might perhaps be better approached from a slightly different direction. We know from his surviving dramatic fragments that he was a versatile poet, well able to adapt Greek quantitative patterns to the phonetic demands of Latin. The choice of Saturnian rhythms for his epic must have been deliberate, though why he restricted himself to the resulting short, rigidly defined units for an extended narrative has never been clear.²⁸ This is not purely an aesthetic question, a matter of poetic craft and its consequences. Behind it lie larger questions of reception and expectation.

A certain "prosaic" quality has long been noted in some of the Naevian fragments, an effect likened to the reportage of what we imagine archaic chronicles to have been like. What might it mean, then, for the history of epic that Naevius wrote lines like this?

transit Melitam
exercitus Romanus. insulam integram
urit vastat populatur, rem hostium concinnat.

The Roman army
crossed to Malta. The entire island it
burned devastated destroyed upset the enemy's affairs.

The fragment combines the kind of tricolon and syllable play familiar from military inscriptions with a sequence of thought and arrangement around the caesurae that is characteristic of both Saturnian epic and *elogium*.²⁹ The closely contemporary epitaph on the sarcophagus of L. Cornelius Scipio, consul in 259, is a good example.

hec cepit Corsicam Aleriamque urbem,
dedet Tempestatebus aedem meretod.

He captured Corsica and the city of Aleria.
He gave the Storm-gods a temple, as they deserved.

And it is hardly unique. The similarity suggests that early epic and epitaph were in some sort of alignment, but which was aligning itself with which?

The chronological difficulty we face in attributing the Saturnian's appeal for epic poets to its "official" sound encourages the obvious alternative, viz. that the public language of inscriptions came to be shaped by the epic example. The poem

recording Roman deeds would then have informed the language of the noble Romans who took credit for them. According to this scenario, the rhythmic cola of ritual language were reshaped by Rome's first poets to create a new medium for Latin epic. The process could well have begun with Livius Andronicus, whose abbreviated translation of the *Odyssey* was probably the first attempt to put Saturnian rhythms to a narrative purpose. Naevius then added the final touches to its metrical shape. The native elements of the verse – native in connotation if not necessarily origin – thus produced a new Roman sound for a new Roman genre, free to recall the Homeric tradition without being overwhelmed by it. Aristocrats then came to embrace and make it their own, so much their own that an unrecognized metrical joke may lurk in the notorious exchange of barbs between Naevius and the powerful family of the Caecili Metelli, who are said to have threatened the poet in a line using language derived from the stage but cast in what Naevius himself had made the aristocracy's meter: "dabunt malum Metelli Naevio poetae" ("The Metelli will make trouble for the poet Naevius").³⁰

Did Naevius, then, forge the first link between Latin epic and the aristocracy? The image of the feisty, independent poet familiar from the ancient biographical tradition has not encouraged anyone to imagine him as a pen for hire. A willingness to incorporate family traditions into his epic enterprise would, however, go far to explain how the campaign against Malta won mention in Naevius's poem, since the reason for its inclusion is not otherwise obvious. The island of Malta does not figure prominently in the history of the First Punic War. It is too remote (and lies in the wrong direction) to have been of strategic importance either in the struggle for Sicily that engaged the warring fleets and armies or for the Romans' eventual invasion of Africa. What Naevius describes in such emphatic, triumphal language was probably no more than a pirate raid or, at best, a training operation for the African venture.³¹ We date the raid to either 258 or 257 on the basis of a single line in the Roman history of Augustine's protégé Orosius in the fifth century CE, who preserved the memory of an attack on the islands of Lipara and Malta by a consul he calls Atilius, usually taken to be C. Atilius Regulus, who held that office in 257.³² Orosius is our only source for this information, and the uniqueness of such late testimony is striking. The relevant sections of Polybius, our main source for this period, make no mention of Malta (1.24–5). Neither does the surviving epitome of Livy's seventeenth book, though Livy was almost certainly Orosius's own source.³³ So what was Livy drawing upon, if not Polybius?

A lost source for a lost book will not leave a very clear trail, but the possibilities are limited. One is Polybius's own Roman source, the annalist Fabius Pictor, but why Fabius would himself have recorded a minor episode in a strategic backwater only puts the question back a little further in time. It seems reasonable to believe that the source was sufficiently emphatic to have attracted Livy's attention in the first place and to have stuck in his memory. There could well have been multiple sources or non-literary sources – for example, a family history or a surviving inscription – but the point is less how knowledge of the Malta campaign might have been preserved than why a selective historian like Livy would have chosen to include it in his history.

A famous poem – we know the *Bellum Punicum* had become a school text for Romans of the later first century – would do this very well.³⁴ It therefore seems possible that the poem was itself Livy's source for this information about Atilius's campaign in Malta, and probable that, at the very least, its route to survival ran through Naevius's notice of it. According to this scenario, the *Bellum Punicum*, which not just recorded great names and great deeds but did so in what became the commanders' own language, began as a celebration and eventually became a repository of aristocratic memory. This would mean that Ennius's eventual turn from the distinctly Roman associations of Saturnian verse to the wider connotations of the hexameter represents a significant shift in cultural reference.

The generation of Romans that destroyed the power of Carthage in the late third century was the same generation that discovered the power of written history and of written epic.³⁵ Neither of these literary developments was without Greek influence. The earliest Roman histories were actually written in Greek and used such Greek conventions as dating by Olympiads, probably because their Roman authors accepted Greek as the very medium of history. Even when the elder Cato launched a tradition of Latin historiography in the 150s, he preserved the Greeks' passion for genealogy, reflected the Hellenistic interest in foundation legends (*ktiseis*), and dated Rome's own founding with reference to the fall of Troy. Famous Greek deeds like the Spartan Leonidas's stand at Thermopylae served him as comparanda for Roman achievements. This sounds very like Ennius's habit of describing Romans in Homeric terms, though the impulse to appropriate Greek devices can be traced back to Andronicus's Latin version of Homer and Naevius's embedding of a foundation legend into his historical narrative to produce a structural complexity recalling the *Odyssey*.³⁶ Yet Ennius also strengthened, perhaps even introduced, Roman elements of lasting significance. The very word *annales*, widely associated with traditional Roman historiography, first appears in the Latin record as the title of his poem, as does the practice of dating by consular year. That convention suggests a distinct way of thinking about past time, a characteristic of later Roman history that may then have a poetic origin: Ennius has thus been called the first Roman annalist (so Rüpke 2006, a controversial claim). But that was not epic's only contribution to the writing of history. Ennius also rewrote the relationship between epic verse and the Roman elite.

We have grown accustomed not just to reading Ennius's Homeric importations against a background of increasing Hellenization, but to thinking of his poem as the aristocracy's possession. This has been due in part, and understandably, to its obvious attention to their exploits, and also because we think of the Hellenization of Roman culture as an aristocratic phenomenon. We know that Andronicus, like Ennius after him, earned his living at Rome not just through poetic commissions but also by teaching the fundamentals of Greek letters to young aristocrats: his translation of the *Odyssey* actually preserves traces of his schoolmaster's knowledge of basic literary exegesis. Later generations became ever more competent in such matters. By the 160s, the great Pergamene scholar Crates of Mallos, who had initially come to Rome on a diplomatic mission, easily found audiences there able and eager

to follow his complex, idiosyncratic style of Homeric disquisition. And that, said Suetonius nearly three centuries later, was the beginning of serious literary study at Rome, because Romans had their interest piqued and began applying comparable analytic tools to texts in their own language.³⁷

Thinking of Ennius's achievement in this context of elite interests and education encouraged earlier generations of scholars to see him as a propagandist for one or another aristocratic patron and today encourages some to read the literary history of the third and second centuries as a kind of culture war *avant la lettre*.³⁸ Yet for Greeks, Homer was not so exclusively an aristocratic possession. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were both popular entertainments and the primary means of establishing literacy at every rung of the social ladder: children throughout the Greek world learned the basics of reading and writing by copying, reciting, and parsing Homeric verses. Increasingly by the third and second centuries, and perhaps especially obvious to outsiders like the Romans who were looking in on the Greek legacy, the Homeric poems were central to the cultural heritage that defined Greek identity.³⁹ This suggests an alternative way to understand Ennius's innovation. To become a Roman Homer, as he explicitly set out to do, might well have meant expanding, not narrowing the audience for epic. His innovations might then be understood as a step toward cultural unity, not division, aspiring to popularize epic on the Greek model. That would align Ennius's poem with Cato's near-contemporary effort to make history the possession of the Roman people generally, not the exclusive plaything of Rome's great houses.⁴⁰ With Cato and with Ennius, epic and history advanced the people's memory of their past and sense of their present or, at the least, reminded aristocratic audiences of a *populus Romanus* larger than themselves. Yet epic and history did not move in tandem, a fact that brings us back to Cicero's philosophical dialogue on the laws.

As the example of Naevius makes clear, the boundary between the poetic record and what we think of, sometimes too strictly, as the "historical" record was always permeable, but poetry and history were not originally of equal power, either socially or aesthetically. Rome's first great poets were professionals. They were the slaves, freedmen, and ambitious provincials who by the mid-second century gave Romans a poetic tradition of enduring value, and they left a legacy so pervasive that even into the Augustan age, when poetry had become largely an upper-class pursuit, the affectation of humble origins and modest position endured.⁴¹ Prose followed a slower trajectory. It long remained the province of aristocratic amateurs, whose memoirs and histories, speeches and essays achieved no comparable artistic success until Cicero's own generation. That awkward fact of literary history finds tacit acknowledgment in *De Legibus* as Cicero follows his gentle dismissal of poetry's claim to truth with a corresponding dismissal of history's claim to admiration. Atticus moves the discussion from the one to the other by pointing out that Rome has not yet produced historical writing equal in quality to its oratory, and he calls upon Cicero to elevate the former as he did the latter. Cicero agrees in principle but pleads lack of time, proposing instead the discussion of law's basis in principles of justice and human nature that will constitute the body of *De Legibus*.⁴²

This circuitous preamble seems an odd way to begin the dialogue and has understandably puzzled commentators.⁴³ So oblique an attack on the power of tradition, essential for rescuing legal study from antiquarianism and claiming it for philosophy, will only prove its relevance later through the inevitable critiques of Roman legal tradition and the gentlemen scholars, Rome's *iuris consulti*, who preserved them (e.g., 2.47). Their explanations of legal principles will, it turns out, withstand scrutiny no better than the historicity of Marius's great oak at Arpinum.

Cicero's initial invocation of pleasure (*delectatio*) and truth (*veritas*) to distinguish the realms of poetry and history thus turns out to be unhelpful, as well as a bit disingenuous. Poetry and history are joined here as two ways of recording the past, and they are noteworthy less for their different relationships to truth (or to fiction) than for their common commitment to preserving tradition. And in this cause, as Atticus suggests in his critique of historical writing, poetry has been much more successful. While Ennius's epic maintained its status for succeeding generations, neither Cato's *Origines* nor any of its successors did the same. Cicero's generation knew no definitive history. The first enduring monuments of Roman historiography would come only after Cicero's death with the work of Sallust, and history did not begin to rival epic as a definer of Roman identity until Livy began publishing his immense *Ab urbe condita* in the early years of the Augustan Principate.⁴⁴ Until then, epic took precedence in the popular imagination.

This is easy to forget because the hexameter propaganda of the late Republic – poems celebrating Caesar's campaigns or Cicero's consulship – had a narrower, more self-serving aim. Those poems were literary effusions with a distinctly aristocratic bias, a limited readership, and a proportionally limited shelf-life. The only good to come of them were the elegant refusals of the Augustan poets to write epic that we know as *recusationes*. Ultimately, though, Ennius's poem was the one that counted because his innovations led to Vergil, and Vergil's ostensibly legendary poem came to define for Romans what it meant to be Roman in a way that history never quite managed: Vergil is what we find scrawled on the walls of Pompeii, not Livy.⁴⁵ The poets' view of the past was the one that became ubiquitous. Rome had history and epic and, most influential of all, history through epic. What Ennius aspired to, Vergil would achieve.

Notes

Authors and titles of Latin works are identified fully in the text. Their abbreviation in the notes follows the practice of *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 3rd edn. 1996. Two standard compilations are also cited in abbreviated form: *CLE* = F. Bücheler (ed.). 1895–1926. *Carmina Latina Epigraphica*. Leipzig; *GLK* = H. Keil (ed.). 1857–80. *Grammatici Latini*. 7 vols. Leipzig.

- 1 These omens from Cicero's *Marius*, which survive through a self-quotation at *Div.* 1.106, appear with related material as nos. 15–17 in Courtney 1995: 174–6. The recollection at Cic. *Leg.* 1.2 seems to confuse the two omens. The omen of the eaglets returns at Appian, *BC* 1.7.61 and Plutarch, *Mar.* 36.

- 2 The setting is thus rich in personal as well as literary associations. See Vasaly 1993: 30–3; O’Sullivan 2006: 148–9.
- 3 Livy, *Preface* 6–7: “The traditional stories from before the city was founded or from the time of its founding better suit the poets’ fictions than the unbiased records of history, and I intend neither to confirm nor refute them. It is an indulgence granted to antiquity to make the origins of cities more revered by mixing human events with divine ones.” For discussion of this attitude as reflected in Cic. *Leg.* 1–5, see Wiseman 2002: 338–42 and Feeney 1991: 258–60.
- 4 Marius (b. c. 157 BCE) was elected consul for the last time in 86 but died before taking up his command. So *Leg.* 4, *in recenti memoria*. In *Red. pop.* 19–20, Cicero claims personal knowledge of him.
- 5 Reconfigured yet again, with debts to both Homer and Cicero, at Vergil, *Aen.* 11.751–6; see Goldberg 1995: 141–4. The aesthetic and ideological effects of Ennius’s importation of Homeric material to historical contexts are much discussed.
- 6 So Quintilian 11.1.23–6, though the lines he quotes are probably not original but the reworkings of a deft (and cruel) parodist. For the surviving fragments, see Courtney 1995: 156–73, and for the poem’s reception, Allen 1956; Goldberg 1995: 148–54.
- 7 The “laws” are made explicit at *De or.* 2.62: “Nam quis nescit primam esse historiae legem, ne quid falsi dicere audeat? deinde ne quid veri non audeat? ne quae suspicio gratiae sit in scribendo? ne quae simultatis?” Tacitus’s famous promise to write without prejudice (*sine ira et studio*, *An.* 1.1) is of a piece. Cicero’s appeal to Luceius is at *Fam.* 5.12.3. Woodman 1988 has proven seminal for understanding the “literary” values of ancient historiography, values well known and widely acknowledged by ancient critics (e.g. Cic. *De or.* 1.70; Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.31). For the historicity of epic in particular, see Feeney 1991: 5–56.
- 8 So Wiseman 1998. Cato’s outrage at the fact that Nobilior took Ennius with him on the Aetolian campaign (*ap.* Cic. *Tusc.* 1.3) was probably prompted by the success of *Ambracia*, not the (later) appearance of *Annales* 15, which also included these events. See Goldberg 2006: 428–31.
- 9 This is the thesis of Goldberg 2005: 1–19. For a more pointed attack on the traditional “beginning” of Roman literature, see Habinek 1998: 34–45.
- 10 The work was conceived in 15 books, ending with Fulvius Nobilior’s triumph over Aetolia and dedication of a temple to Hercules of the Muses in 187. Books 16–18, covering events from 187 to 178, were a later addition (Plin. *Nat.* 7.101).
- 11 Ennius’s claim formed the proemium to Book 7 (206–12, Skutsch 1985). For the Ennian view of Naevius, see Hinds 1998: 56–63.
- 12 So Gildenhard 2003, and by implication Rüpke 2001. The role of aristocratic patronage in shaping the content and reception of Ennius’s poem remains controversial. Rossi and Breed 2006: 400–20 provide an analytic, evenhanded summary of the issues.
- 13 Suetonius, looking back to the original reception of Roman literature, counts the poem among those not yet in wide circulation by the later second century (*parum adhuc divulgata*, *Gram.* 2.2). The military achievements it celebrated were soon eclipsed by the defeat of Macedonia in 168, and this may well have cost the poem its original readership. See Goldberg 2006: 437–47.
- 14 *CLE* 3. Degrassi 1957: 122 accepts the metrical identification, though his version does not print the text as Saturnians. Neither does Courtney 1995, who is more skeptical (“I think that this is prose,” 208). The stone, found in 1786 and now in the Vatican Museum, is thought to be from a statue base. It is certainly too small (55 × 60 cm) to have adorned a temple or even a small shrine of some kind.

- 15 Cole 1969 begins his study with a helpful summary and compilation of the Saturnian corpus. The catalogue of non-literary Saturnians with full bibliography in Suerbaum 2002: 330–5 is especially helpful. For the various explanations of the meter, see Parsons 1999 and further references there.
- 16 Images of the stone are widely available, e.g., in Degrassi 1965: no. 61; Gordon 1983: pl. 7. As so often, the message rests in the physicality of the monument as a whole, not just in the literal meaning of its text. Corbier 2006: 9–27 provides an insightful overview of this phenomenon.
- 17 This elaborately decorated sarcophagus with its famous inscription, often reproduced, may be found in Degrassi 1965: no. 132, and Gordon 1983: pl. 5.
- 18 Discussion (with photo) in Kruschwitz 2002: 25–32. Such deliberate arrangement around the colon-boundary is typical of even literary Saturnians.
- 19 *GLK* 1.288 (Charisius, citing Accius 289–91R); *GLK* 6.265 (Bassus). Bassus found another Saturnian in an inscription of 190 by Acilius Glabrio. Atilius Fortunatianus (*GLK* 6.293) reports still another. See Courtney 1995: 207–10.
- 20 Liv. 40.52.5–7. A second version was preserved in the temple of Capitoline Jupiter. Livy's text has noteworthy gaps, but there is no reason to think he is paraphrasing an original verse inscription.
- 21 The parallels in Skutsch 1985: 653–4 cast doubt on the likelihood that Livy's opening phrase deliberately echoes Enn. 494, *pace* Wiseman 2002: 331. I am not convinced by the argument of Cardinali 1987 that Cato's *Origines* began with a hexameter. Quint. 9.4.72–8 thinks epic rhythms unsuitable in prose, though he is more accepting of iambs because of their proximity to the natural rhythms of speech (76).
- 22 Tuditanus's inscription as restored by Bücheler, *CLE* 1859, is accepted by Degrassi 1957: no. 335, and Courtney 1995: no. 4. The scholion to Cic. *Arch.* 27 is at p. 179 Stangl (1964).
- 23 Sciarrino 2006: 457. Meyer 2004: 53–4 reviews the traditional argument for the meter's antiquity and ritual associations. Its role in prophecy is stressed by Wiseman 2006: 516–22.
- 24 Courtney 1995: 201. The hymn survives in an inscription recording priestly activities of 218 CE. It had long since ceased to be understood by the priests.
- 25 Varro's testimony at *L.* 7.36 is little more than a gloss on Ennius's lines (206–7), and Cic. *Div.* 1.114 offers even less. All Varro adds to what he infers from Ennius is that the name "Saturnian" was traditional – at least for him in the first century. The derivative and self-contradictory nature of the evidence, clear from the testimonia as presented by Luiselli 1967: 105–14, is harder to recognize as presented in Suerbaum 2002: 32–3.
- 26 For dating of the Scipionic *elogia*, see Courtney 1995: 216–20; Kruschwitz 2002: 33–6, 58–9. The beginning of the epitaph for Calatinus survives in quotation by Cic. *Fin.* 2.116, *Amic.* 61. The Scipionic poems may have been its model.
- 27 Courtney 1995: no. 2, dated to the second century. The verses are clearly meant to be Saturnian, but the cola are irregular and alternate lines are slightly indented as if they were elegiacs. See the photo in Degrassi 1965: no. 93. They are thus unhelpful for defining the meter, but have quite a lot to suggest about its reception. Other inscriptions more domestic than honorific are the dedication by the sons of Gaius Vertuleius (no. 6) and the monument to Marcus Caecilius (no. 8), both dated to the mid- or late second century.
- 28 The translation of the *Odyssey* into Saturnians by Livius Andronicus is widely accepted as Naevius's precedent, but the relative chronology of the two poems is in fact unknown,

nor would the one decision necessitate the other. Andronicus was probably dead by the end of the third century; the *Bellum Punicum* was thought to be a work of Naevius's old age (Cic. *Sen.* 40). His death is usually put c. 199. Neither poem was on the scale of the Homeric epics.

- 29 Naevius, *Bellum Punicum*, fr. 32 (Strzelecki 1959). The colometry is uncertain. For this problem, as well as for the stylistic affinities of the fragment, see Goldberg 1995: 79–81.
- 30 The verse is certainly a Saturnian. The ambiguous Naevian line to which it is thought to reply, “Fato Metelli Romae fiunt consules” (By fate at Rome [or, as a bane to Rome] the Metelli became consuls) is an iambic senarius, though not necessarily delivered from the stage, where *malum dare* (“to make trouble”) was standard language for a master's threat to a slave. Interpretation of this exchange is very controversial. Basic discussion in Suerbaum 1968: 31–42; revisionist interpretations in Gruen 1990: 96–10; Goldberg 1995: 33–6.
- 31 So Thiel 1954: “the chief purpose of the raid was to train crews and marines for the more daring enterprise of the coming year” (203). See also Barchiesi 1962: 337–40.
- 32 Orosius 4.8.5: “Atilius consul Liparam Melitamque insulas Siciliae nobiles pervagatus evertit” (The consul Atilius sailed to Lipara and Malta, distinguished islands of Sicily, and sacked them). The pairing of these islands is striking, since they lie in opposite directions from Sicily. Control of Lipara, not Malta, was a pressing Roman objective: Atilius Caiatinus, consul in 258, failed in an early attempt against it.
- 33 Orosius 4.7.12 uses the phrase *navales socii* to mean simply “sailors,” a distinctly Livian usage (so Briscoe 1981: *ad* Liv. 34.6.12). Polybius himself drew on the pro-Carthaginian Philinus of Acragas and the Roman Fabius Pictor (writing in Greek). See Polyb. 1.14–15.
- 34 Hor. *Ep.* 2.1.53–4, “Naevius in manibus non est et mentibus haeret / paene recens?” (“Doesn't Naevius remain in our hands and stick in our memory as if recent?”) may exaggerate, but the precedent of Andronicus makes the school possibility reasonable (cf. *Ep.* 2.1.69–71). The kind of historical evidence available to Roman writers is reviewed by Cornell 1995: 4–30, an opinionated survey. Not everyone will agree with every opinion. Poetic sources are not known, but not impossible for Livy, though the Ennian influence proposed for his account of the Ambracian campaign in Book 38 has been doubted. So Walbank 1979: 123–8 on Polyb. 21. The interpenetration of epic and historical narratives is well documented for later times, e.g., by Ash 2002.
- 35 The confluence of events and the forces beyond them in this period are now much discussed, though a scholarly consensus has yet to emerge. Important contributions include Rüpke 2000 and Gildenhard 2003.
- 36 Thus Ennius famously describes a soldier fighting at Ambracia (*Ann.* 391–8 Skutsch) in language recalling Ajax's defense of the Achaean ships (Hom. *Il.* 16.102–11). See Goldberg 1995: 87–9. Naevius opened his poem with events of the 260s, but apparently used a historical reference to Sicily to insert a mythological digression telling the story of Aeneas's flight from Troy. So, with great probability, Rowell 1947.
- 37 Suet. *Gram.* 1–2. Fr. 20 of Andronicus's *Odusia* seems to translate not Homer but a scholiast's gloss on a difficult passage (Fränkel 1932: 306–7). For Crates' much more professional style of Homeric exegesis, see Porter 1992: 85–114.
- 38 The somewhat demeaning view of Ennius as *poeta cliens* found its last major statement in Skutsch 1985: 1–2 (and notably 569–70); the revisionist argument begins with Gruen 1990: 106–22. The question is further complicated by the Romans' interweaving of “friendship” and “patronage” in the vocabulary of social relationships. So, rightly, Konstan 2005: 345–7. For literature as an aristocratic weapon, see Habinek 1998: 34–68.

- 39 For Homer as a school text, see Morgan 1998: 100–19; Cribiore 2001: 194–7, and for his status more generally, Lamberton 1997. Even among Romans, the Homeric poems represented a kind of cultural capital: see Farrell 2004.
- 40 Gotter 2003 makes this point about Cato. For Cato and Ennius, see Goldberg 2006: 444–6. In a preamble to *Annales* 1, Ennius claimed to be a reincarnated Homer. See Suerbaum 1968: 94–113; Skutsch 1985: 147–67.
- 41 So, most notoriously, Horace's claim to be a freedman's son ("me libertino patre natum," *Sat.* 1.7.6) and his address to Vergil as the client of noble youth ("iuvenum nobilium cliens," *C.* 4.12.13). For the realities, see respectively Williams 1995 and Belmont 1980, and more generally the prosopographic data gathered by White 1993: 211–22. I thank David Konstan for this observation.
- 42 *Cic. Leg.* 1.5–13, which includes a brief survey of Roman history's (largely stylistic) deficiencies. Cicero discussed the affinities of oratory and history at *De or.* 2.51–64. His goal is stated at *Leg.* 1.17: "natura enim iuris explicanda nobis est, eaque ab hominis repetenda natura" ("For we must explain the nature of Justice, and this must be sought for in the nature of man").
- 43 So Dyck 2004: "The relation of this conversation to the following dialogue about law is not straightforward" (71). The germ of the conversation lies in Cicero's model, the *Laws* of Plato, where the Cretan Cleinias says that Minos laid down the laws of Crete in consultation with Zeus, and the Athenian Stranger promptly identifies Homer as the source of that tradition (*Pl. Laws* 624, alluding to *Od.* 19.178–9). Cicero makes his Platonic model explicit at *Leg.* 1.15.
- 44 Sallust's first work, a monograph on the conspiracy of Catiline, is dated c. 42/41. Livy's early books are apparently works of the 20s. Caesar's *Commentarii*, written in the late 50s, were much admired by contemporaries (e.g., *Cic. Brut.* 262) but did not (initially) claim the status of history. Livy, Rome's first "literary" historian, was also the first not drawn from the senatorial class, a fact not completely unnoticed by his contemporaries.
- 45 The evidence for Vergil's influence as gathered by Horsfall 1995: 249–55 is quite revealing. Poetry, beginning with Homer and Vergil, was the core of the Roman school curriculum. Oratory and history only came later, and thus reached a more limited range of students. Quint. 1.8.4–12 and 2.5.1–2 treats this division in the presentation of poetry and prose as a matter of course.

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The Song and the Sword: Silius's *Punica* and the Crisis of Early Imperial Epic

RAYMOND D. MARKS

Historical Epic in Decline

In the third and second centuries BCE history was, far and away, the preferred subject matter of epic poetry in Rome, but in the waning days of the Republic that began to change.¹ As relations between public officials became increasingly acrimonious, civil strife a common occurrence, and the disintegration of the Republic an increasingly feared possibility, many poets began to shift their attention from the sphere of public affairs to the world of private, personal experience and in doing so turned their backs on the historical epic, the literary vehicle by which the achievements of the Roman state had traditionally been commemorated. This shift was facilitated by the growing popularity of Alexandrian poetry, especially the works of Callimachus, a Greek poet of the third century BCE. Shunning the deeds of kings and heroes, he showed the Romans how to pursue new, untrodden literary paths and to mine the rich storehouse of Greek myth for that purpose.² The message was timely. Whether looking for an escape from the grim realities of the day or a safer distance from which to examine them, many poets, particularly those known as “new poets” or neoterics, turned to smaller genres, such as lyric or epigram, and began to delve more deeply into the world of Greek myth.³ Some of them, like Catullus, saw an opportunity to transform the grand genre of epic itself, to bring it in line with the new Callimachean sensibilities, and epics on Greek mythological themes, mostly in the form of “mini-epics” or *epyllia*, began to appear.⁴

As the dust settled after the collapse of the Republic, it looked at first as if a reconciliation between the traditional epic on Roman history and the new epic on Greek myth might be possible: in the *Aeneid* Virgil fashioned myth and history into a coherent, meaningful whole that addressed timeless questions of Roman nationalism and identity, yet also spoke to the tragedies and triumphs of the historical moment

in which it was composed. Of course, there had never really been a hard and fast distinction between myth and history in the first place, and many myths that were Greek in origin held important cultural and historical interest for Roman audiences; the Aeneas legend, for one, had done so for centuries.⁵ Yet Virgil's achievement, while considerable in so many respects, appears to have done little to convince his contemporaries and immediate successors that Roman history or even mytho-history was a subject still suitable for epic treatment. In the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius, epics on Greek mythological themes outnumber epics on Roman historical themes by almost three to one,⁶ and for the rest of the first century CE mythological epics would be composed at a rate roughly equal to or greater than that of historical epics.⁷

How do we account for the steady production and, at times, predominance of mythological epics in the early Empire? And why was the number of historical epics relatively modest? It is not sufficient to say that epic poets in the early Empire simply inherited and, therefore, perpetuated the tastes and practices of their predecessors. This may be true, or truer, of the poets of the Augustan age, who were much closer to the cultural, political, and social conditions that gave rise to the mythological epic in the late Republic; after all, they were living in the immediate wake of the neoteric revolution and had not only experienced years of civil war themselves, but were still dealing with its aftermath in the form of a promising, yet not entirely stable Augustan peace. But what of those poets who came after them, those who never shared these experiences? Why did they continue to turn to Greek myth and away from Roman history?

Writers of the early Empire liked to point the finger at moral decline, one sign of which, as they saw it, was the vogue for Greek myth in the intellectual and literary activities of the age. A frequent object of their scorn, for example, is the fantastical topics, drawn from myth and legend, on which students were required to speak as a part of their rhetorical training; such exercises, unconnected with reality, reflected and, in turn, perpetuated, in their view, the self-absorbed indifference and moral depravity of the times.⁸ Similar grumblings can be heard about the state of poetry, including epic; Persius, Martial, and Juvenal all rail against the popular appeal of Greek myth on the grounds that it is clichéd, contrived, sensationalist, and without redeeming moral value.⁹ Unfortunately, those who complain about moral decline in the early Empire rarely have anything substantive to say about its causes; commonplace explanations, such as the corrupting influence of wealth or the natural processes of rise and decline, are preferred over insightful analysis. Also, their criticisms are not even unique to their times; moral decline was a common preoccupation among late republican and early Augustan authors, and Cicero, in fact, had already defended the didactic value of traditional Roman poetry, most of all historical epic, against what he saw as the pretentious frivolity of the "new poets," those who were instrumental in turning epic into a vehicle for Greek myth, as was noted above.¹⁰

One of the few who looked more deeply into the question of decline was Tacitus, and his insights have proved helpful. In his *Dialogus de Oratoribus*, Curiatius

Maternus, one of the dialogue's interlocutors, posits that public speaking thrives in an unstable state or society, such as Rome was in the late Republic, because there is a greater need for it and greater *libertas* or "freedom" to practice it, but that the more peaceful and ordered a state or society is, such as is the case, he contends, during the Principate, the greater one's willingness or compulsion to obey authority, and the more the opportunities for public speaking are curtailed and freedom of speech is restricted; consequently, oratory plays a diminished role in public discourse, becomes less relevant, and degenerates (36–41).¹¹ That new restrictions on speech attended the rise of the Principate and profoundly shaped the thoughts and modes of expression of its subjects, as Tacitus suggests, is widely recognized in the study of early imperial literature, and in all likelihood the vogue for Greek myth was one of its consequences as well. After all, it was in those same tumultuous days of the late Republic, to which Maternus refers, that poets turned to myth in response to political pressures and sensitivities,¹² and it would stand to reason that they continued to do so in the early Empire for similar reasons, even though the pressures and sensitivities at that time, given the general stability of the Principate, were probably more clear-cut and less shifting.

It does not follow, in any case, that the historical epic, in turn, had to decline in popularity as well. For one, it is facile to assume that choosing a topic for one's epic was a zero-sum act, such that every choice of Greek myth entailed the compensatory loss of an epic on Roman history to posterity. Second, even if we suppose that because of restrictions on free speech poets were concerned about their own self-preservation and for that reason sought out the safer world of Greek myth, we cannot exclude the possibility that those concerns might have equally invited poets to pursue historical topics, particularly those that would appeal to the powerful within the Roman state; in this way they might gain favor or at least prevent themselves from falling out of it. Although the decline of historical epic's popularity in the early Empire would seem to militate against this assumption, there is also no evidence of poets being punished or persecuted for composing such epics in this period.¹³ This is not to say that political pressures did not discourage some from choosing historical topics but, rather, to point out that there were compelling reasons why one might compose an historical epic as well. And the fact that poets turned to historical epic almost as often as they turned to mythological epic from the mid-first century CE on suggests that the risks of choosing the former were not significantly greater than the benefits of choosing the latter. Concerns of self-preservation may have played a role, but there must be more to the story.

Those who composed historical epic, I would suggest, must themselves bear some responsibility for its declining popularity, and that is because in responding and reacting to the political realities of their times they undermined what had been a key factor in the genre's success, the close relationship between its meaning and message. As Sander Goldberg (1995: 148) has shown, for much of the Republic epic kept its appeal because it was concerned with a long-term view of history and the Roman community as a whole, even as it commemorated the accomplishments of individuals:

Because the subjects of epic held communal rather than largely personal interest, the genre could honor individuals without losing its own integrity. Epic encouraged the merging of individual and group achievements; individual glory contributed to and even created communal glory. The broader epic's narrative scope, the firmer that identification and the wider its appeal.

But as powerful individuals emerged in the late Republic and epic poets felt their gravitational pull, the genre began commemorating their contemporary deeds, and as epics became less concerned with the long-term history of the Roman "many" and more concerned with the short-term history of the "one," the leader, general, or statesman making history, they gradually lost their capacity to speak to a wide audience.¹⁴ Here I quote Goldberg, who, with reference to Ennius's successors in the late Republic, puts his finger on the problem (1995: 165): "as his successors came to write poems of increasingly narrow historicity . . . the dangers of incongruity between the contemporary and the traditional necessarily mounted." Dangers indeed! Just think. Why should anyone feel compelled to take lessons about civic responsibility from epic, if he had little or no chance of shaping the course of Roman history and making a name for himself in the process? Why aspire to emulate an epic hero when the best one could hope for was to bask in the reflected glory of one's leader? It is no wonder that under such conditions the traditional historical epic became increasingly irrelevant.¹⁵

Goldberg does not extend his approach to post-republican epic, but it certainly could be. It stands to reason that the trend of "narrow historicity" in historical epic might become entrenched and the problem of the genre's marginalization more acute as the prospect of one-man rule, which loomed large in the late Republic, became a reality in the early Empire. In fact, most historical epics composed in the first century CE, as far as we can tell, took a relatively short-term view of history, commemorating contemporary or near-contemporary events and individuals.¹⁶ Yes, the political realities of the late Republic and early Empire probably made Greek myth an attractive alternative for epic poets, but it seems that history, contemporary history, was working against its own treatment in epic form as well: just as the Principate excluded the many from active and meaningful participation in the workings of the state and made their participation less relevant as a pursuit and less attainable as a goal, so the historical epic excluded the many from the deeds and accomplishments of its heroes and thus contributed to its own marginalization and obsolescence.

Poet-Warriors in the *Punica*

That the conditions of one-man rule manifested themselves in the narrowed focus of early imperial historical epic and contributed in that way to its declining appeal is a hypothesis that needs to be tested. To that end I shall look closely at Silius Italicus's *Punica*, a 17-book epic on the Second Punic War, composed during the

reign of Domitian. I have chosen Silius because he allows us to look at the problems facing historical epic from the perspective of a poet who composed one. On first glance, I acknowledge, this choice may not seem apt; after all, Silius writes about an event from Rome's distant past and in this respect is out of step with the prevailing trend in early imperial historical epic, which was to write about recent events. Yet he is also a remarkably self-aware and perceptive thinker on contemporary literary and cultural matters and is a man of and for his times as well: he is conversant with current views on moral decline, understands fully the divide that was separating mythological and historical epic in his day, takes a clear stance on why historical epic had fallen into decline since the Republic, and even attempts to find a solution to the problem. Moreover, because he stands at the end of epic's first major life-cycle in Rome, which extends uninterruptedly from Livius Andronicus in the third century BCE to a little beyond Silius's own lifetime, into the late second century CE, he possesses a uniquely informed understanding of almost the entire expanse of the epic tradition in Rome.¹⁷

In Silius's view epic used to offer its readers instructive examples, Roman examples drawn from their own history, of virtuous and noble conduct. But with the rise of epics on Greek mythological themes, this kind of epic was pushed to the margins, and the genre as a whole lost its didactic function, its civic value, and its wider cultural relevance in Roman society. The epic suffered, in other words, because it had become disconnected from history in the sense of Roman history, and the solution, as he saw it, was to reconnect them. Silius's intentions are, to a certain extent, clear from his choice of historical subject matter, the Second Punic War. But to understand his purpose in full, we shall have to look closely at the poets he depicts in the *Punica*, as it is through them that he most clearly articulates his views on poetry and marshals his defense of historical epic. The approach was not necessarily new; inserting poets into one's poetry was a recognized gesture of literary self-reflexivity, a way for a poet to talk about his own poetry and his views on poetry. What Silius does with his poets is quite remarkable, though; in all but a few cases he turns them into warriors or, more precisely, poet-warriors.¹⁸ This allows him to address and mend what he sees as one of the major problems facing epic in his times, the disconnection between the genre and history; for the poet-warrior symbolically bridges the world of poetry, which Silius himself inhabits, and the world of history, about which he writes, and thus becomes the perfect vehicle by which to reconnect them.

A good example of how Silius uses the poet-warrior to defend historical epic comes in *Punica* 12, where a Carthaginian named Hostus faces off against the soon-to-be poet Ennius in Sardinia (12.390–414). In this encounter, Hostus hurls a spear at Ennius, which the god Apollo deflects (12.403–6); Apollo then explains to Hostus that since Ennius is going to be a great poet, he is sacred and cannot be harmed, and praises Ennius for his future literary accomplishments (12.407–13); finally, Apollo slays Hostus with an arrow (12.414). That Silius invented this episode is obvious from Apollo's appearance in it, but Ennius's role as a warrior is largely a fiction as well. We know that he lived through and experienced the Second Punic War, and it is possible that he served in Sardinia, but there is no evidence of

such a conflict as Silius describes here.¹⁹ So, why introduce Ennius into the *Punica*, and why in this way?

The fact that Ennius is a poet, or soon will be, is one clue: it invites us to consider Silius's relation to him as that of one poet to another and to acknowledge the similarities between them. Both are epic poets, and both compose epics on Roman history, Silius the *Punica*, Ennius the *Annales*; the latter seems to be the work Apollo refers to when he says Ennius will sing of "Italian wars" ("bella Italia," 12.410). Ennius even covered in books 8 and 9 of his epic the same period of history Silius covers in the *Punica*, the Second Punic War. By allusion, Silius also suggests that he and Ennius share a common purpose in writing epic poetry, to glorify Rome's martial accomplishments: in 12.411 Apollo says that Ennius "will raise leaders to the sky" ("attolletque duces caelo"), a phrase that echoes the opening lines of the *Punica* itself, where Silius announces that he will sing about the arms by which "the glory of the Aeneadae raises itself to the sky" ("ordior arma, quibus caelo se gloria tollit / Aeneadum," 1.1–2). Finally, Ennius's very status as a poet-warrior invites us to identify Silius with him. After all, if the collapse of the poet and the warrior into one figure implies the collapse of the poet into the martial world about which he writes, then the inference lies readily at hand that Silius is here blurring the distinction between himself, the poet of the *Punica*, and Ennius, about whom he is presently writing.²⁰

But Silius does more than that in the episode: he also differentiates his preferred form of epic, the epic on Roman history, from its contemporary alternative, the epic on Greek mythological themes. The key to understanding this gesture is the metapoetic force of Apollo's intervention, an aspect of the episode that Sergio Casali has called attention to (2006: 582–91). Casali observes that Apollo here plays the role he often plays in the *recusatio* in Augustan poetry; this is a programmatic statement in which one literary form is rejected in favor of another (ibid. 587–8). The Augustan poets often used the *recusatio* in imitation of Callimachus, who claimed that Apollo advised him to avoid poetry of a grand, common sort and to pursue, instead, smaller, novel paths in poetry.²¹ From whatever kind of poetry Callimachus wished to distance himself – and there is some disagreement about that – it is clear that when Roman poets of the Augustan period appropriated the "Callimachean" *recusatio* form to defend their choice of smaller, more modest genres, such as bucolic or elegiac poetry, the "grand" genre from which they were setting themselves apart was epic.²² Now, Casali brings our Flavian poet Silius into the orbit of such Callimachean-Augustan poetics by comparing Apollo's intervention in *Punica* 12 with his intervention in an episode in book 9 of Virgil's *Aeneid*; there Aeneas's son Ascanius makes his first kill in battle, after which Apollo appears to him and tells him to withdraw from the battlefield (*Aen.* 9.590–658).²³ Casali (2006: 588–9) argues that by forcing Ascanius to withdraw in this way Apollo plays the role he often plays in the "Callimachean" *recusatio* in Augustan poetry and that, by extension, or rather by allusion, the god plays that role when he checks and kills Hostus in *Punica* 12 as well; that is, just as Apollo in the *recusatio* dissuades poets from writing epic, so in both epics he excludes someone from an "epic career" as a martial epic hero: Ascanius in *Aeneid* 9, Hostus in *Punica* 12. Yet Silius's Apollo, as

Casali himself recognizes (2006: 589–90), is different from Virgil's in one notable respect: in an "un-Callimachean" way, he enables an epic career, that of Ennius, and not only as a subject of epic poetry, a warrior who may go on fighting presumably in the war, but as a writer of epic poetry, who will go on to produce the *Annales*. How do we account for this "un-Callimachean" moment in Silius's text?

One way, perhaps, is to see it as an attempt to distance Ennius and, by extension, Silius himself from Callimachean poetics, and, on the surface, this appears to be an attractive possibility; for what Ennius and Silius compose is epic, and Callimacheanism in the Augustan period represented, to a large extent, a reaction against traditional epic poetry. The major problem with this interpretation, however, is that in the Flavian period, when Silius is composing his epic, Callimacheanism is no longer identified with "smaller" genres. As Ruurd Nauta has shown, Flavian poets in "smaller" genres, such as Statius in his *Silvae* and Martial in his epigrams, expressly deny affiliation between their works and Callimachean poetics, and it is, instead, poets of the traditionally "grand" genre of epic who adopt a Callimachean posture.²⁴ Valerius Flaccus in the proem of the *Argonautica* and Statius in the proems of the *Thebaid* and *Achilleid*, Nauta points out (2006: 27–34), use the Callimachean *recusatio* form not to reject epic in favor of another genre but to reject one kind of epic (epic on contemporary Flavian history) in favor of another (the epics they compose). What this evidence suggests is that in the Flavian period the distinction between mythological and historical epic was being drawn quite sharply, so much so that the one could be viewed as a Callimachean alternative to the other. Therefore, if Silius is aware – and I think he must be – of how his contemporaries are using the tradition of the Callimachean *recusatio* to defend their choice of mythological epic, then Casali's analysis needs to be slightly revised. Casali is surely correct that Silius draws on this Callimachean tradition in the Ennius episode and that he undercuts it by having Apollo advance Ennius's career as a poet of historical epic, but we must be clear about what that "un-Callimachean" gesture would have implied for Silius's contemporary audience: probably not a rejection of Callimacheanism in the Augustan sense, but a rejection of Callimacheanism in the Flavian sense. It is indeed likely, then, that Silius here is not simply defending Ennius's, and by extension his own, choice of historical epic, but is expressly setting that choice apart from the alternative of mythological epic.

But what is at stake in making that choice? For Silius it is not simply a matter of aesthetic preference. He wants to demonstrate to his readers that historical epic is the more morally instructive alternative of the two; that, unlike epics on Greek mythological themes, his kind of epic promotes and perpetuates Roman virtues, especially those martial virtues upon which Rome's success in the Second Punic War depended and upon which, we may suppose, he believed Rome's success as an imperialist nation still depended in his own times. The poet-warrior Ennius helps him make this very argument; for he is living proof that the historical epic poet and the historical epic warrior share common ideals and goals because he exhibits as a warrior the very martial virtues he will commemorate in song as a poet. Of course, the god Apollo's intervention underscores that very point. As god of the bow and

the lyre, he himself represents the poet-warrior ideal and, in this specific instance, exemplifies it: he slays Hostus with his bow and thus makes possible for Ennius a career of the epic lyre.²⁵

To demonstrate the shortcomings of Greek myth, Silius calls on the assistance of another poet-warrior, a Cumaean named Teuthras, who sings songs for Hannibal and his men during their winter-stay at Capua in *Punica* 11. When we first lay eyes on Teuthras, he looks like the typical bard of epic poetry who entertains guests at a banquet and releases them from their cares (11.288–90).²⁶ But once the pro-Roman goddess Venus orders her Cupids to wound Hannibal and his men with their arrows during the banquet (11.385–99), it becomes clear that entertaining the Carthaginians is a way of defeating them and the banquet itself a sort of battle in which Hannibal and his men are to be conquered. As Venus herself puts it:

et Tyriam pubem tacitis exurite telis.
 amplexu multoque mero somnoque uirorum
 profliganda acies, quam non perfregerit ensis,
 non ignes, non immissis Gradivus habenis.
 (11.396–9)

And make the Tyrian youth burn with silent shafts. Their army, which the sword, fire, and Mars, with his reins let loose, could not break must be ruined by caresses, by much wine, and by sleep.²⁷

After the Cupids accomplish this task with the bow (11.410–31), Teuthras next steps onto the battlefield, as it were, with his lyre and sings a song about the lyre (11.440–80). His song enervates the Carthaginians: “So, then, Pierian Teuthras with Castalian song was breaking hearts of men hardened by wars” (“sic tunc Pierius bellis durata uirorum / pectora Castalio frangebatur carmine Teuthras,” 11.481–82).

Teuthras is not just a poet, but a warrior, a poet-warrior, and he even conforms to the type in that he does as a warrior what he sings about in his poetry. For Teuthras’s song is not only about the lyre, but about the power of the lyre, how it tames and enchants wild beasts, nature, and men; he sings, in other words, about the very thing he is doing, exercising the power of his own lyre. In fact, Teuthras may be the greatest of Silius’s poet-warriors. He breaks the Carthaginians’ martial spirit at the height of their powers – in the previous book they won at Cannae their greatest victory of the war – and they never completely recover from it; they fail to win another major victory for the rest of the epic. But what is especially noteworthy about Teuthras’s contribution is the Greek mythological content of his song. To demonstrate the power of the lyre, he sings of Amphion building the walls of Thebes by the magic of his lyre (11.440–5), the rescue of the bard Arion by a dolphin and the enchanting of the sea-god and prophet Proteus (11.446–8), the soothing of Achilles (11.449–52), and, above all, the wondrous deeds of Orpheus (11.459–80). It is no mere coincidence that Silius chooses a song of this sort to weaken Hannibal and his men; in doing so he can suggest that such poetry, poetry on Greek mythological themes, is morally uninspiring and even destructive.²⁸

As the positive antithesis to this kind of poetry stands Silius's own poetry, his Roman historical epic; his is a song that, instead, instills and fortifies in its readers those virtues and ideals that Teuthras's song undermines in Hannibal and his men: hard work, a thirst for glory, and martial valor, or in Latin *virtus*. Silius already suggested as much in the Ennius episode but drives this point home at the beginning of *Punica* 15, when the Roman Senate looks for a candidate to take over the command of the Spanish campaign (15.1–17). There, as Scipio privately contemplates his purpose in life (15.18–19), he is visited by two goddesses (20–31), Voluptas ("Pleasure") and Virtus ("Virtue").²⁹ Voluptas, who speaks first, tries to persuade Scipio to live a life of otiose comfort and inactivity, of luxury and drunkenness, a life untroubled by the hardships of war, and even offers him examples of mythical unions she has brought about to give evidence of her beneficial powers (32–67). Virtus, who speaks next, takes the opposite view, encouraging him to pursue the active, military life; it is his duty, she says, to fight on behalf of his country and his people, and his reward will be glory, honor, victory, triumph, and, ultimately, immortality (68–120). It is this second speech or, rather, "song" – and Silius says Virtus "sang" it (*cecinit*, 121) – that inspires Scipio. The consequences are decisive: after choosing the path of virtue or *virtus*, Scipio goes on to win the command of Rome's forces in Spain, rids Spain of the Carthaginians, proposes a campaign to Africa, wins command of it, defeats Hannibal at Zama, and brings the war to a victorious close for Rome.³⁰ Virtus's words have, then, the exact opposite effect on Scipio and Rome's cause to that which Teuthras's song had on Hannibal and his cause in the war and to that which, we may presume, Voluptas's speech would have had on Scipio if he had chosen her path. And why not? As we are surely meant to identify the virtues the goddess Virtus espouses with those that Silius himself espouses in his epic and to approve of them rather than of the vices that Teuthras's song in book 11 induces in Hannibal and his men and those that Voluptas in book 15 wishes to instill in Scipio, Silius's strategy becomes clear: between these two episodes he is making a case for the moral value and civic function of his own kind of epic poetry on Roman historical themes over against morally destructive and civically unedifying poetry on Greek mythological themes.³¹ But how can we be sure that Silius wishes to hold up for criticism the epic on Greek myth rather than some other literary form?

The revealing moment comes a little later in book 15. After winning a victory at New Carthage in Spain, Scipio is offered a Spanish bride but, refusing to accept her, returns her to her betrothed (15.268–71). His close friend Laelius then praises him for this deed (274–82), deeming him greater than Agamemnon and Achilles who, when fighting over a woman, disgracefully violated the trust between themselves during the Trojan war (277–82).³² By so comparing Scipio and these two Greeks at Troy, Silius invites us to contrast the kinds of epics that immortalize such heroes and the kinds of poets who compose them. This interpretation was already prepared for, in fact, in the Nekyia (visit to the underworld) of book 13, where Scipio sees the shade of Homer (778–97) in the company of the heroes he sang about in his epics, including Achilles (800) and Agamemnon (802). The close association between the

poet and his heroes is further underlined on that occasion by Scipio himself, who laments that Rome has no such poet to spread the fame of her accomplishments and then deems Achilles lucky for having had a Homer to immortalize him: "Fortunate Achilles, whose fate it was to be shown to peoples by such a voice! Your virtue has grown with song" ("felix Aeacide, cui tali contigit ore / gentibus ostendi! crevit tua carmine uirtus," 796–7).³³ Scipio does not know what we already know, that there will be such a poet to sing of Rome's accomplishments in the Second Punic War and that he is fighting in the same war: Ennius, the poet-warrior we encountered in book 12.³⁴ Of course, we could add another, Silius himself.

Scipio also errs in admiring Achilles' epic *fama*, and it is Laelius's speech in book 15 that calls our attention to that fact. In contrasting Scipio's virtuous conduct with the shameful conduct of Achilles, and of Agamemnon too, Laelius foregrounds the deep ethical divide between them and thereby calls into question the exemplary value of Achilles' *virtus*. The contrast Laelius draws implies another, however, between Scipio's and Achilles' respective epics and epic poets, that is, between Silius's and Ennius's Roman historical epics and Homer's Greek mythological *Iliad*. Telling on this point are Laelius's words of praise for Scipio in 15.275–6: "Let the glory and fame of great heroes yield to you, and their virtue celebrated in song" ("cedat tibi gloria lausque / magnorum heroum celebrataque carmine virtus"). Laelius here echoes Scipio's remark in the *Nekyia* that Achilles' fame has grown because of Homeric song: "crevit tua carmine virtus" (13.797). By this allusion Silius encourages us to read the two comments in relation to one another and, in particular, to regard as dubious not only the lasting value of Achilles as an epic model, but the value of the medium that perpetuates it, Homer's *Iliad*. At the same time, he invites us to see Ennius's historical epic, the *Annales*, or perhaps Silius's own *Punica*, as superior alternatives, epics that offer their Roman readers positive moral *exempla*, such as Scipio, and, in the case of the *Punica* specifically, an epic that teaches them, as it even teaches one of its own heroes (Scipio, again), to be devoted, loyal, courageous, glory-seeking warriors for Rome. In the final analysis the tales of Greek myth simply do not measure up, whether they are told by Teuthras, Voluptas, or Homer. Yes, there is a close correlation between the epic poet and the subject matter he writes about; one cannot be separated from the other.

Epic and History: A Vicious Circle

Silius's preoccupation with differentiating the Roman historical epic from the Greek mythological epic suggests that he saw a clear distinction between the two and that he felt the former was suffering, in some measure, from the popularity of the latter. The care with which he defends his choice of historical epic on the basis of its superior moral and civic value also suggests, as we saw, that he believed that its alternative, the mythological epic, was contributing to and was itself a product of the decadence of his times and that the historical epic was suffering precisely because of its inability to teach and instruct readers within that moral climate. In

these respects Silius's views on epic broadly coincide with those of contemporary moralists. But what of his solution, his attempt to reinvigorate the historical epic by reconnecting epic and history? What does it tell us about the problems epic was facing in his day? Here too he reveals a great deal to us, and perhaps more than he would have realized himself.

It is telling, for one, that Silius composes neither of the two kinds of epic that were most popular in the early Empire, the epic on Greek myth and the epic on contemporary Roman history. Instead, he produces an anachronism, the *Punica*, which looks back to a bygone age of Roman history – the Second Punic War took place almost 300 years before he wrote about it – and to a bygone form of epic. This is not to say that Silius is a strict escapist; he updates and makes relevant for his audience the past of which he sings by grafting a contemporary message onto his epic. As I have proposed elsewhere (Marks 2005), Silius casts the Second Punic War as a moment of political change, in which Rome takes her first steps toward her future of one-man rule. To this end, he emphasizes the collective nature of Rome's troubled and largely unsuccessful resistance to Hannibal in the first half of the epic, but focuses on the positive contributions of individual Romans, above all, Scipio, in the second, victorious half. In fact, in Silius's version of events, Scipio not only proves his worth as a great warrior and general by leading Rome to final victory over Hannibal, but he even emerges as a kind of ideal king or proto-emperor in the process, who wins the support of Rome's gods, people, and even Senate, and in doing so brings the city together after early defeats and hardships in the war.

In these ways, Silius impresses upon his readers the value, and indeed, the necessity, of concentrating power in the hands of an individual and thus makes an historical argument on behalf of one-man rule, an argument that gains particular force when it is recalled that this story takes place in the days of the old Republic, long before the Principate. Silius also makes, however, a teleological argument on its behalf: in book 3 the god Jupiter reveals that Rome's imperial future is a divinely planned and ordained goal, and, importantly, it is the Flavian emperors, especially Domitian, to whom the god specifically looks ahead and with whom he strategically links Scipio in that prophecy; the chronological divide that separates Scipio and the Second Punic War from Domitian and Flavian Rome is accordingly effaced. By so manipulating history, Silius invites his readers to read the past in close relation to the present and, in particular, teaches them how they can pull together in times of trouble, just as the Romans did in the Second Punic War, and in a way that even validates the imperial system of one-man rule under which they were living.

To be sure, the message was timely. The civil wars of 69 CE showed how important a strong, charismatic leader who could unify Rome was to restoring and maintaining peace, and even though the city enjoyed relative stability during the reign of Vespasian (69–79 CE), one can imagine the uncertainty and trepidation that attended Domitian's rise to power in 81, the year in which Silius began composing his epic; for Domitian was the third emperor in three years, his father Vespasian having died in 79, and his brother Titus only two years later, in 81. The Second Punic War, as Silius tells it, then, offers the Romans of his day, including the emperor himself,

important lessons in how to work for continued peace and to realize their destiny of imperial greatness.

Now, this is all well and good, but here is the problem: as Silius strives to make Roman history relevant, yet does so by turning to an older form of epic, an incongruity between the medium and the message begins to show itself, an incongruity between the traditional historical epic, which aims to teach a wide readership about martial valor and civic responsibility, and the contemporary lesson, which privileges the contributions of the one over those of the many. To his credit, Silius recognized the drawbacks of composing an epic on contemporary history; the “narrow historicity” of such epics had only hurt the cause of the traditional historical epic, which Silius was championing, and such an epic would have been ill-suited to getting his moralizing message across as well. Also, as we have just seen, he understood well the dilemma of composing an epic about Rome’s distant past; as the danger of anachronism needed to be avoided, he grafted a contemporary message onto his poem. Despite all of that, however, I am not sure that he fully appreciated the difficulty resolving this dilemma would entail. For in striving to bridge epic and history, to bridge the medium and the message, he perpetuated, unintentionally it seems, a contemporary, even all-too-contemporary, view of historical epic, one that not only undermined his own attempt to assert the value and relevance of the historical epic, but did, in fact, contribute to and was still contributing to its obsolescence.

Let us consider, once again, Ennius in book 12. Ennius is, by all accounts, a fitting model for Silius, who wishes to resuscitate the old, republican-style, historical epic. To make this point, however, Silius cannot let Ennius be seen for the poet he is; he must turn him into a warrior, a poet-warrior. By this move, as we have observed, Silius impresses upon us the moral and civic value of historical epic because it suggests that fighting in war and composing poetry about war are complementary activities that share common, worthwhile goals. But there is a problem with Silius’s logic here: by holding up Ennius as a model of poetic and martial virtue, he comes very close to suggesting that the one cannot be fully realized without the other, that the poet of historical epic is ideally someone who has had the experience of the warrior, and, conversely, that the warrior is ideally suited to being a poet of historical epic. One can imagine how counterproductive to the recovery of the old, historical epic form it would be if this ideal ever became a reality, if the poets of historical epic were the warriors making the history, especially in the early Empire, where the number of warriors who were making history was quite small, essentially comprising the emperor and perhaps a few close to him. Indeed, under such conditions an epic poet might not only feel compelled to glorify the contemporary deeds of one warrior, the emperor, rather than those of the many, but since that warrior, the one making history, the one about whom the poet writes, would himself be a poet, there would be little to prevent him from writing about and commemorating himself and from excluding other poets and other warriors from the genre in the process.

What is most interesting about all this is that it in fact happened; this scenario already was a reality that helped bring down the historical epic in the late Republic.

Here I return to Sander Goldberg's study of republican epic. Writing poems of "increasingly narrow historicity," he shows, is one problem the epic faced at that time, but, as he also points out, "the problem grows keener when the poet writes explicitly of contemporary affairs, and keener still when he actually writes about himself" (Goldberg 1995: 166). In this context, Goldberg is talking about Cicero, who not only composed an epic of "narrow historicity" in the form of his *Marius*, but epics in which he himself was the hero: *De consulatu suo* and *De temporibus suis*. Of course, in book 12 of the *Punica* Silius does not imply that Ennius's *Annales* was a work of such "narrow historicity" nor that he wrote at length about himself and his own deeds in it. But it is telling that to make the argument he wants to make on behalf of historical epic there, Silius cannot do without turning Ennius into something he was not, a poet-warrior, and that in doing so he actually perpetuates a way of thinking about the ideal relationship between the poet and his subject matter that is decidedly un-Ennian or post-Ennian, that Ennius's successors in the late Republic exemplified, and that, as Goldberg shows well, was detrimental to historical epic's survival.

In fact, one of those Ennian successors, Cicero, was a major influence on Silius (Ripoll 2000). We know from Martial and Pliny that Silius admired him greatly, and numerous allusions to Cicero's works throughout the *Punica* testify to that fact (ibid.). I do not know whether Silius regarded Cicero as a kindred thinker on epic matters, but it does not seem to me unlikely. Cicero advocated, much as Silius does, the civic function of poetry, including the important role that epic, in particular, played in commemorating and perpetuating Roman virtues (n. 10 above). Moreover, one of Silius's most Ciceronian moments in the *Punica* is Virtus's speech to Scipio in book 15, in which our poet spells out most clearly and explicitly his own views on the duties and virtues of the Roman martial, epic hero, views drawn largely from Cicero's *De Legibus* and *De Republica* (Heck 1970). What is more, Silius even does for Cicero what he does for his poets: he turns him into a warrior. In the catalogue of Italian forces in *Punica* 8, Silius mentions Cicero's ancestor Tullius and then describes the future Cicero as follows:

Ille, super Gangen, super exauditus et Indos,
implebit terras uoce et furialia bella
fulmine compescet linguae nec deinde relinquet
par decus eloquio cuiquam sperare nepotum.
(8.408–411)

He, heard beyond the Ganges and beyond the Indians, will fill the lands with his voice
and will check deadly wars with the bolt of his tongue and, then, will not leave it to
anyone after him to hope for glory equal to his eloquence.

Although Silius is clearly thinking here of Cicero as orator rather than as poet, by holding him up as an example of an orator-warrior, so to speak, he makes much the same point he made through his poet-warrior Ennius: that literary and civic or military activities can be or, better yet, should be related and complementary pursuits.³⁵

But Silius did not really need to look back to the Republic for poet-warriors; he had one in his own day, Domitian. In addition to being the emperor, Rome's chief warrior and general, Domitian wrote epics on contemporary history (Coleman 1986: 3088–95; Penwill 2000): one, it seems, on his brother Titus's victories in the Judaean War, and another on the Flavian defense of the Capitoline during the civil wars of 69 CE, an exploit in which he himself was personally involved. Silius acknowledges Domitian's roles as both poet and warrior in Jupiter's prophecy in *Punica* 3. There, the god foretells the emperor's future military conquests (3.607–17) and then says:

Quin et Romuleos superabit uoce nepotes,
quis erit eloquio partum decus. huic sua Musae
sacra ferent, meliorque lyra, cui substitit Hebrus
et uenit Rhodope, Phoebus miranda loquetur.
(3.618–21)

And even with his voice he will surpass Romulus' descendants, whose glory will be won by eloquence. To him the Muses will bring offerings, and better than the lyre at which the Hebrus stood and Rhodope came, he will say things wondered at by Phoebus.

If Silius was looking to lend weight and authority to his defense of historical epic, as he makes it through his use of poet-warriors, he could not have chosen a more timely and influential representative of one than Domitian himself. At the same time, though, we might well ask ourselves whether anyone could have represented a greater disincentive to the rehabilitation of the old historical epic. This problem is put squarely before us by Silius's contemporary, the rhetorician Quintilian who, in praising Domitian the poet, asks: "for who could better sing of wars than he who wages them?" ("quis enim caneret bella melius quam qui sic gerit?" *Inst. Or.* 10.1.92). Yes, who better? But who better to discourage others from singing of wars and from waging them as well? After all, the emperor not only demands, and gets, for his own exploits and those of his family, the lion's share of martial glory, but he is also the one who is glorifying those exploits in his own epic poetry. What room is left for other warriors, other poets, other poet-warriors? In the final analysis, Silius's poet-warrior ideal does not represent a real solution to the decline of historical epic in the early Empire at all; it more closely approximates its cause, the monopolization of epic and history by a select few, who had contributed to and were still contributing to the genre's obsolescence. In this respect, Domitian is a fitting successor of Cicero, and Cicero himself a fitting successor of Ennius, not the real Ennius, but the poet-warrior Silius portrays him to be.³⁶

As we can see, Silius tells us a good deal about why the historical epic declined in the early Empire. He uses the poet-warrior figure to recover a lost form of epic, the epic with a broad civic, moral message, but he does not see that contemporary history and epics on contemporary history were working against the realization of that goal and that poet-warriors or poet-statesmen like Domitian and Cicero were,

in part, to blame. As they sang about themselves, they made historical epic a genre that was self-absorbed and alienating to others, even to Silius himself. Indeed, it is telling that to bring his medium in line with his message, to reconnect epic and history as he does, Silius does not seek his subject matter in the present but looks or, to a certain extent, escapes to the distant past, even if in doing so he tries to make that past relevant to his contemporary audience. Yet he persists in thinking that the poet-warrior is part of the solution rather than the problem. Why this is the case I do not know, but it does suggest that the way of thinking about the relationship between the poet and his poetry, which Cicero and Domitian represented, was quite influential, so much so that even a “throw-back” poet like Silius perpetuates it. So, does this mean that Silius's *Punica* is likewise a self-absorbed and alienating piece of epic?

Silius's friend Martial seems to think so. In epigram 4.14, Martial shows a clear understanding of what Silius is trying to achieve through his poet-warriors in the *Punica*. In lines 1–5 he breaks down the distinction between Silius, the poet, and what he is writing about, the war, and thus turns him into what he turns his own poets into, warriors, poet-warriors:

Sili, Castalidum decus sororum,
qui periuria barbari furoris
ingenti premis ore perfidosque
astus Hannibalis levisque Poenos
magnis cedere cogis Africanis . . .

Silius, glory of the Castalian sisters, who crush the faithlessness of barbarian rage with your huge voice and force the untrustworthy tricks of Hannibal and the fickle Carthaginians to succumb to the great Africanis . . .

As we consider these lines in relation to what follows in the poem, where Martial asks Silius to put down his serious epic poetry and join him in some fun, games, and poetry of a lighter sort (6–14), we sense that Martial is not simply advising Silius against working too hard, but is suggesting to him that he is out of touch, that he is living in his own anachronistic fantasy-world, fighting battles long past by himself.³⁷ Silius is thus shown to be replicating the kind of isolating and self-absorbed epic activities of a Cicero or a Domitian, who, for getting wrapped up in their own poetry about themselves, exclude others in the process. Silius looked to his poet-warriors to advance, as he saw it, the cause of epic, to rescue historical epic from its marginalization. But, as Martial reminds us, being a poet-warrior has its drawbacks too; it undermines one's attempt to reconnect epic and history and to make historical epic relevant again in Rome.

Appendix

Table 11.1 Roman republican and early imperial epics

<i>Author</i>	<i>Title(s)/Content</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Type</i>
Republican			
1. L. Andronicus	<i>Odusia</i>	mid-late 3rd c. BCE	mytho(history)
2. Cn. Naevius	<i>Bellum Poenicum</i>	mid-late 3rd c. BCE	(mytho)history
3. Q. Ennius (239–169 BCE)	<i>Annales</i>	179–169 BCE	(mytho)history
4. Accius (170–84 BCE)	<i>Annales</i>	late 2nd–early 1st c. BCE	history (?)
5. Hostius	<i>Bellum Histricum</i> (Courtney 52–5)	late 2nd c. BCE	history
6. A. Furius Antias	<i>Annales</i> (?) (Courtney 97–8)	early 1st c. BCE	history
7. Cn. Matrius	<i>Iliad</i> , translation of (Courtney 99–102)	early–mid-1st c. BCE	myth
8. Ninnius Crassus	<i>Iliad</i> , translation of (Courtney 107)	unknown	myth
9. Sueius	unknown (Courtney 116–17)	early–mid-1st c. BCE (?)	unknown
10. Volusius	<i>Annales</i> (Catullus 36)	mid-1st c. BCE	history
11. Catullus (87–58 BCE)	Marriage of Peleus and Thetis (Poem 64)	mid-1st c. BCE	myth
12. M. Tullius Cicero (106–43 BCE)	<i>De Consulatu Suo Marius</i> <i>De Temporibus Suis</i> (Courtney 149–52, 156–78)	late 60s BCE 50s BCE 50s BCE	history history history

13. P. Valerius Cato (b. 90 BCE)	<i>Dictynna Lydia</i> (Courtney 181–91)	mid-1st c. BCE	myth
14. M. Furius Bibaculus	<i>Aethiopsis Annales Belli Gallici</i> (Courtney 192–200)	mid-1st c. BCE	myth history
15. C. Licinius Calvus (82–by 47 BCE)	<i>Io</i> (Courtney 201–11)	mid-1st c. BCE	myth
16. C. Helvius Cinna (d. 44 BCE)	<i>Zmyrna</i> (Courtney 205–6)	mid-1st c. BCE	myth
17. Q. Cornificius (d. 42 BCE)	<i>Glaucus</i> (Courtney 226–7)	mid-1st c. BCE	myth
18. P. Terentius Varro Atacinus	<i>Argonautica Bellum Seguanicum</i> (Courtney 238–43)	mid-1st c. BCE	myth history
19. Caecilius	<i>Magna Mater</i> (Catullus 35)	mid-1st c. BCE	myth
Augustan and Tiberian			
1. P. Vergilius Maro (70–19 BCE)	<i>Aeneid</i>	31–19 BCE	mytho-history
2. Ponticus	<i>Thebaid</i> (Prop. 1.7, 1.9)	late 1st c. BCE	myth
3. Lynceus	<i>Thebaid Heraclid</i> (Prop. 2.34)	late 1st c. BCE	myth
4. Rabirius	Fragment on civil war between Antony and Octavian (Rocca 65–91)	late 1st c. BCE	history
5. Domitius Marsus	<i>Amazonis</i> (Rocca 93–96)	late 1st c. BCE	myth

Table 11.1 (continued)

<i>Author</i>	<i>Title(s)/Content</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Type</i>
6. Pompeius Macer	<i>Anteomerica</i> <i>Posthomeric</i> (?) (Rocca 96–9)	late 1st c. BCE	myth
7. unknown	<i>Bellum Actiacum</i> (Courtney 334–40)	late 1st c. BCE	history
8. P. Ovidius Naso (43 BCE–17 CE)	<i>Metamorphoses</i>	c. 2–8 CE	myth
9. Tuticanus	<i>Phaenacid</i> (Rocca 164–5)	late 1st c. BCE–early 1st c. CE	myth
10. Rutilius Lupus	<i>Nostos</i> of Menelaus and Helen (Rocca 165)	late 1st c. BCE–early 1st c. CE	myth
11. Largus	<i>Antenorid</i> (Rocca 165)	late 1st c. BCE–early 1st c. CE	myth
12. Iulus Antonius	<i>Diomedea</i> (Rocca 165–6)	late 1st c. BCE–early 1st c. CE	myth
13. Camerinus	<i>Posthomeric</i> or <i>Heracleid</i> (Rocca 166)	late 1st c. BCE–early 1st c. CE	myth
14. Tuscus	Story of Phyllis and Demophoon (Rocca 166)	late 1st c. BCE–early 1st c. CE	myth
15. Arbonius Silo	Fragment on the death of Hector (Rocca 167–8)	late 1st c. BCE–early 1st c. CE	myth
16. Alfius Flavius (?)	<i>Bellum Carthaginense</i> (?) (Rocca 170)	late 1st c. BCE–early 1st c. CE	history
17. Carus	<i>Heracleid</i> (Ov. <i>Pont.</i> 4.16)	late 1st c. BCE–early 1st c. CE	myth

18. Trinacrius	<i>Persëid</i> (Ov. <i>Pont.</i> 4.16)	late 1st c. BCE–early 1st c. CE	myth
19. The Two “Prisci” (?)	unknown (Ov. <i>Pont.</i> 4.16)	late 1st c. BCE–early 1st c. CE	myth (?)
20. Numa	unknown (Ov. <i>Pont.</i> 4.16)	late 1st c. BCE–early 1st c. CE	myth (?)
21. Albinovanus Pedo	<i>Thesëid</i> Fragment on Germanicus (Rocca 107–31)	early 1st c. CE	myth
22. Cornelius Severus	<i>Bellum Siculum</i> <i>Res Romanae</i> or <i>Carmen Regale</i> (Rocca 133–58)	early 1st c. CE	history
23. Sextilius Ena	Fragment on Cicero (Courtney 329)	early 1st c. CE	history
24. Iulius Montanus	Fragments on daybreak and nightfall (Courtney 330)	early 1st c. CE	unknown

Claudian, Neronian, and Flavian

1. L. Vagellius	Epic fragments (Courtney 347)	mid-1st c. CE	unknown
2. M. Annaeus Lucanus (39–65 CE)	<i>Bellum Civile</i> <i>Iliaca</i> <i>Orpheus</i> (epyllion?) <i>Catachthonion</i> (epyllion?) (Courtney 352–5)	mid-1st c. CE	history myth myth myth
3. Nero, emperor (37–68 CE)	<i>Troica</i> <i>Attis</i> or <i>Bacchae</i> (epyllion?) (Courtney 357–9)	mid-1st c. CE	myth myth

Table 11.1 (continued)

Author	Title(s)/Content	Date	Type
4. P. Baebius Italicus (?)	<i>Iliad</i> , translation of (= <i>Ilias Latina</i>)	mid-1st c. CE	myth
5. Saleius Bassus	unknown (Quint. <i>I.O.</i> 10.1.90, Juv. 7.79–81)	mid–late 1st c. CE	unknown
6. Serranus	unknown (Quint. <i>I.O.</i> 10.1.89, Juv. 7.79–81)	mid–late 1st c. CE	unknown
7. Artius Labeo (?)	<i>Iliad</i> , translation of <i>Odyssey</i> , translation of (Courtney 350)	mid-1st c. CE	myth myth
8. C. Valerius Flaccus (d. by 96 CE)	<i>Argonautica</i>	late 1st c. CE	myth
9. Domitian, emperor (51–96 CE)	<i>Bellum Judaicum</i> <i>Bellum Capitolinum</i>	late 1st c. CE	history history
10. Statius’ father (d. 90 CE)	Civil wars of 69 CE (Stat. <i>Silv.</i> 5.3.195–204)	70s CE	history

11. P. Papinius Statius (c. 45–96 CE)	<i>Thebaid</i> <i>Achilleid</i> <i>Bellum Germanicum</i> (Courtney 360)	c. 80–92 CE c. 95–96 CE c. 90 CE	myth myth history
12. Silius Italicus (c. 28–102 CE)	<i>Punica</i>	c. 81–98 CE	history
13. Gaurus (?)	Trojan War (Martial 9.50)	late 1st c. CE	myth
14. Iulius Cerealis	<i>Gigantomachia</i> (Martial 11.52)	late 1st c. CE	myth
15. Manilius Vopiscus	unknown (Stat. <i>Silv.</i> 1.3.20–3)	late 1st c. CE	unknown
Second century CE			
1. Cordus	<i>Theseid</i> (Juv. 1.1–2)	c. 100 CE (?)	myth
2. Clemens	Epic on Alexander the Great (Courtney 401)	mid-2nd c. CE	history
3. Gordian I, emperor (c. 159–238 CE)	<i>Antoninias</i> (<i>SHA, Gord. tres</i> 3.3)	late 2nd c. CE	history

Abbreviations used: Courtney = Courtney 1993; Rocca = Rocca 1989.

Notes

- 1 Among historical epics, there are Gnaeus Naevius's *Bellum Poenicum*, Quintus Ennius's *Annales*, Hostius's *Bellum Histricum*, Furius Antias's *Annales*, Volusius's *Annales*, Cicero's *De Consulatu Suo*, *Marius*, and *De Temporibus Suis*, Furius Bibaculus's *Annales Belli Gallici*, and Varro Atacinus's *Bellum Sequanicum*. See generally Goldberg 1995 and, on early historical epics, Goldberg, this volume. As I am only concerned in this paper with narrative epics, didactic epics and hexametrical panegyrics are excluded from consideration.
- 2 For Callimachus's aesthetic credo, see *Aetia* fr. 1.1–38 in Pfeiffer 1949 (Pf.), *Epigram* 28 Pf., and *Hymn* 2.105–12 Pf. For his influence on Roman poetry in the late Republic and Augustan period, see Hunter 2006.
- 3 Cicero coined the term *poetae novi* or “new poets” (*Orator* 161) and also referred to them in Greek as *neōteroi*, the “younger” or “newer” ones (*Epistulae ad Atticum* 7.2.1), from which is derived the term “neoteric.”
- 4 The earliest examples of Greek mythological epic in Rome are translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; these include what is commonly considered the first epic in Latin, Livius Andronicus's *Odusia*, and Gnaeus Matius's and Ninnius Crassus's translations of the *Iliad*. The following epics, composed in the mid-first century BCE, would seem to fall under the category of *epyllion*: Catullus's poem 64, Valerius Cato's *Dictynna* and *Lydia*, Furius Bibaculus's *Aethiopis*, Calvus's *Io*, Cinna's *Zmyrna*, Cornificius's *Glaucus*, and Caecilius's *Magna Mater*. As a translation of Apollonius's *Argonautica*, Varro Atacinus's *Argonautica* must have been much longer than an *epyllion*. For the term *epyllion* (pl. *epyllia*), which is a modern one, and its Hellenistic antecedents, see Gutzwiller 1981.
- 5 Epic poets such as Naevius and Ennius and historians such as Fabius Pictor and Cato, to name a few, had already traced Rome's origins back to Aeneas and Troy. For the early history of the Aeneas legend in Italy, see Gruen 1992: 6–51. In general, myths about legendary heroes were regarded as historical or, at least, susceptible to historiographical treatment, in a way that fantastical stories about the gods or monstrous beasts were not; so, Veyne 1988: 41–57. Even so, it seems reasonable to suppose that a Roman would have readily perceived a difference between, say, Statius's *Thebaid* and Silius's *Punica* that roughly approximates to what we understand as that between myth and history. I would also suggest that this distinction becomes more sharply defined in the early Empire than it was in the Republic.
- 6 The following mythological epics are attested: Ponticus's *Thebaid*, Lynceus's *Heracleid* and *Thebaid*, Domitius Marsus's *Amazonis*, Pompeius Macer's *Antehomerica* and, perhaps, *Posthomerica*, Tuticanus's *Phaeacid*, Rutilius Lupus's epic on the *nostos* of Menelaus and Helen, Largus's *Antenorid*, Iulus Antonius's *Diomedea*, Camerinus's *Posthomerica* or *Heracleid*, Tuscus's epic on Phyllis and Demophoon, Arbonius Silio's epic, of which we possess a fragment on the death of Hector, Carus's *Heracleid*, Trinacrius's *Perseid*, Albinovanus Pedo's *Theseid*. Of course, given the long-established belief in Rome's Trojan ancestry and in Hercules' presence in ancient Italy, it is possible that epics that dealt with the Trojan War or events related thereto, such as those of Iulus Antonius, Pompeius Macer, or Largus, or with Hercules, such as those of Carus or Lynceus, held for their Roman audiences specific historical and cultural interest, and greater interest than epics such as the *Perseid* of Trinacrius, the *Thebaid*s of Lynceus or Ponticus, or the *Theseid* of Albinovanus Pedo. As for Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, it is largely devoted to Greek

myth. Roman history does come into clearer focus toward the end of its penultimate book, but is woven out of and into a neoteric fabric that would have been familiar to the likes of Catullus and Cinna, but quite foreign to the traditional historical epicist. For Ovid's use of history in the epic, see Hardie 2002. Among historical epics, there are Rabirius's epic, of which we possess a fragment, on the civil war between Antony and Octavian, the anonymous *Bellum Actiacum*, Alfius Flavius's (?) *Bellum Carthaginiense*, Albinovanus Pedo's epic, of which we possess a fragment on Germanicus, Cornelius Severus's *Bellum Siculum* and *Res Romanae* or *Carmen Regale*, and Sextilius Ena's epic, of which we possess a fragment on Cicero. For more on the lost or fragmentary epics of the Augustan period mentioned here, see Rocca 1989.

- 7 Mythological epics: Lucan's *Iliaca* and possibly his *Orpheus* and *Catacthonion*, the emperor Nero's *Troica* and possibly his *Attis* or *Bacchae*, a translation of the *Iliad*, known as the *Ilias Latina*, possibly composed by Baebius Italicus, Attius Labeo's translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Valerius Flaccus's *Argonautica*, Statius's *Thebaid* and *Achilleid*, possibly an epic on the Trojan War by Gaurus, and Iulus Cerealis's *Gigantomachia*. Historical epics: Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, Domitian's *Bellum Iudaicum* and *Bellum Capitolinum*, an epic on the civil wars of 69 CE, composed by Statius's father, Statius's *Bellum Germanicum*, and Silius Italicus's *Punica*.
- 8 So, e.g., Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae* 1 pr. 6–7; Petronius, *Satyricon* 1–4; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 2.10.1–12, 2.20.4, 5.12.17, 5.12.22, 8.3.23; Tacitus, *Dialogus de Oratoribus* 31, 35; Juvenal 7.150–70. For an overview of contemporary views on decline in the first and early second centuries CE, see Williams 1978: 6–51 and, with specific reference to the decline of rhetoric, Kennedy 1972: 446–64, 494–7, 515–25. Outdated historical topics, I should note, are often criticized as well.
- 9 Persius: 1.4–5, 32–5, 49–51, 69–75, 92–106, 120–3; 5.1–29; Martial: 4.29, 4.49, 5.53, 7.19, 9.11, 9.50, 10.4, 14.1; Juvenal: 1.1–21, 51–4; 4.34–5; 6.634–61. For more, see Freudenburg 2005.
- 10 For more on moral decline as a preoccupation of republican authors, see Levick 1982. For Cicero's defense of traditional poetry, especially historical epic, see *pro Archia* 18–27; *Tusculanae Disputationes* 3.45, and the citations given in note 3 above. The high esteem in which Cicero held Ennius also reflects this position and sets him conspicuously apart from his neoteric contemporaries. For Cicero's and the neoterics' reception of Ennius, see Prinzen 1998: 161–205.
- 11 The idea that the restriction of *libertas* contributes to the decline of oratory is not unique to Tacitus, however; cf. [Longinus], *De Sublimitate* 44 with Williams 1978: 17–25, and Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae* 1 pr. 6–7 with Sussman 1972: 196–202.
- 12 In fact, Vipstanus Messalla, who speaks before Maternus in the *Dialogus de Oratoribus*, regards the emphasis on fantastical and unrealistic topics in rhetorical training as pernicious to the development of oratory and traces its origins to “a little before the times of Cicero” (“paulo ante Ciceronis tempora,” 35). Maternus makes a different sort of argument, focusing on the changing political conditions of the late Republic, but one that is, nevertheless, complementary with Messalla's. As Levene 2004: 186–7 observes, “Maternus' arguments develop further, rather than contradict, the general model of literary history that Messalla has put forward . . . The chief difference, however, is that [Maternus's argument] examines the issue at a more fundamental level. Messalla saw aesthetic choices arising from an educational system that in turn arose from the general moral choices being made by society; Maternus argues for the ultimate underlying explanation being the change in political structure.”

- 13 Lucan was implicated in the Pisonian conspiracy of 65 CE and forced by Nero to commit suicide (Tacitus, *Annales* 15.49, 56–7, 70). That the emperor envied Lucan's literary success and was thus already hostile to him, as ancient biographers liked to believe, is without sound basis, however; see Gresseth 1957. Ovid was exiled to Tomi in 8 CE, but he attributes his fate not only to a poem, but to what he calls a "mistake" ("carmen et error," *Tristia* 2.207). Even so, the poem in question is probably his *Ars Amatoria* rather than his epic, the *Metamorphoses*, which is, in any event, largely devoted to myth, not history. For more, see Davis 2006.
- 14 On the whole, it seems that annalistic epics, such as those of Ennius, Furius Antias, and Volusius, took a broader view of history than the historical epics of Hostius, Cicero, Furius Bibaculus, and Varro Atacinus, which focused more narrowly on contemporary history and individuals. Incidentally, prose histories of a broad scope begin to disappear in the late Republic as well, a trend parallel to that which we witness in historical epic.
- 15 Irrelevant because epic, as it becomes more narrowly focused on the individual, risks becoming a vehicle of panegyric. So, Goldberg 1995: 169 with reference to republican epic: "Epic thrived at Rome when its subject was national success, and the earnestness with which it studied that success provided the intellectual tension and excitement needed to save the poetry from panegyric and the poets from sycophancy . . . As the Republic faltered, the genre naturally lost its *raison d'être*."
- 16 The *Bellum Actiacum*, Cornelius Severus's *Bellum Siculum*, Domitian's epics, Statius's *Bellum Germanicum*, and his father's epic on the civil wars of 69 CE would all seem to fall under this category. The same cannot be said for certain about many other historical epics because of our imperfect understanding of them, but it is perhaps significant that fragments of several epics for which we have no title (i.e. those of Rabirius, Albinovanus Pedo, Sextilius Ena) are concerned with contemporary or near-contemporary events. Whether Lucan's *Bellum Civile* should be included among these epics is harder to say; for he altogether abandons the traditional, commemorative function of the genre, to sing of *klea andrōn*, as the Homeric saying goes.
- 17 We hear of three epics in the second century CE, Cordus's *Theseid*, Clemens's epic on Alexander the Great, and the *Antoninias* of the emperor Gordian I, but know almost nothing about these works. It would be another 200 years before the epic reclaims, thanks to Claudian, a prominent place in the Roman literary landscape. This reckoning, of course, does not account for Christian epics, such as Juvenius's *Evangeliorum libri quattuor*, which was composed about 60 years before Claudian's literary career began.
- 18 Poet-warriors are relatively scarce in the Greco-Roman epic tradition. A notable exception is Homer's Achilles, but otherwise poet-warriors tend to be little more than names in catalogues or appear only briefly in battle scenes, if they appear at all. In Roman epic, I count one poet-warrior in the *Aeneid* (Cretheus: 9.774–7; but note the singing warriors of Messapus in 7.691–705), one in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Lampetides: 5.111–18), none in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, one in Valerius Flaccus's *Argonautica* (Dorceus: 3.157–60), one in Statius's *Thebaid* (Corymbus: 8.548–53), and one, Achilles, in the *Achilleid* (1.188–94, 572–5, 2.156–8). In Silius's *Punica*, there are three poet-warriors who appear in battle scenes, Murranus (5.461–3), Pedianus (12.212–60), and Ennius (12.390–414). The poet Teuthras is figured as a warrior during the banquet at Capua in book 11, as we shall see below, and the poets Virgil and Homer are introduced in ways that emphasize their connection with martial affairs: Virgil is named in a catalogue of Roman troops (8.591–4), and Homer appears in the Underworld immediately after Alexander the Great (13.762–75) and among heroes of the Trojan War

(13.778–805). Silius also acknowledges the emperor Domitian's status as poet-warrior (3.607–21) and turns Cicero into a kind of statesman-warrior (8.404–11), as we shall see later.

- 19 For the question of Ennius's presence in Sardinia, see Ruebel 1977.
- 20 So, also Casali 2006: 573–4. In addition, Casali points out that the comparison of Ennius with the warrior Orpheus (12.399–400) is unusual because Orpheus, even as a member of the Argonauts, as he is in this simile, never participates in battle in epic versions of the tale. Silius's innovation here is, nevertheless, fitting as “a self-reflexive comment upon his own invention of a fighting Ennius” (Casali 2006: 574).
- 21 See Callimachus's *Actia* and *Hymn* 2, cited in note 2 above.
- 22 See, e.g., Virgil, *Eclogues* 6.1–12; Horace, *Sermones* 2.1.10–20; *Carmina* 1.6, 2.12, 4.3, 4.15.1–4; Propertius 2.1, 3.1, 3.3, 3.9; Ovid, *Amores* 1.1, 1.15, 2.1, 2.18, 3.1. As for what kind of poetry Callimachus was rejecting, see Cameron 1995 and, *contra*, Harder 2002. For the Augustan *recusatio* and its relation to Callimachus, see Wimmel 1960.
- 23 Casali 2006: 582–3, 585–91 identifies the relevant parallels.
- 24 Nauta 2006: 34–40. Martial's hostility, however, is not directed toward Callimacheanism itself, but toward its fascination with myth. In fact, he acknowledges Callimachus's talents as an epigrammatist (4.23), as Nauta 2006: 40 n. 53 points out, and often identifies himself with Roman neoterics (e.g., 4.14, 7.99).
- 25 It was common to see the bow and the lyre as equivalent instruments, in part because of their shape; see, e.g., Nieto Hernández 2008: 43, 51 (I thank Pura Nieto for this comment and reference).
- 26 “Teuthras, a native of Cumae, plays music on his Euboean lyre and soothes with songs ears deafened in war by the harsh rumbling of the fierce trumpet” (“personat Euboica Teuthras testudine, Cymes / incola, et obtusas immiti murmure saeuae / inter bella tubae permulcet cantibus aures,” 11.288–90). Teuthras follows in the footsteps of such epic bards as Demodokos (Homer, *Odyssey* 8.62–82, 482–520), Orpheus (Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica* 1.494–511; Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica* 1.277–93), and Iopas (Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.740–6).
- 27 Venus also acknowledges the role song will play: “Then let the lyre please him [Hannibal] when he is drunk after dinner, and let him sluggishly pass the night, asleep or awake, under our sway” (“tum deinde madenti / post epulas sit grata chelys, segnisque soporas / aut nostro uigiles ducat sub numine noctes,” 11.407–9).
- 28 Orpheus's decapitation, with which Teuthras ends his song (11.475–80), is also a significant instance of foreshadowing. In the later books of the epic Silius figures Carthage's final defeat in the war as a symbolic decapitation and, to that end, identifies Hannibal closely with Lucan's decapitated Pompey as well. See Marks 2008.
- 29 This episode is based on the tale of Hercules at the Crossroads, which was originally told by the sophist Prodicus, but is best known to us today through Xenophon's version of it in *Memorabilia* 2.1.21–34 and Cicero's brief treatment in *De Officiis* 1.118. For Silius's debt to these versions, see Marks 2005: 149–52.
- 30 The central importance of *virtus* in the *Punica* is also impressed upon us by the teleology Jupiter outlines in 3.571–83; there the god reveals that the purpose of the war is to compel the Romans to recover their flagging *virtus* and realize their destiny as a world power.
- 31 There are parallels and echoes between these two episodes that encourage us to read them in specific relation to one another as well. The mythological tales of unions between gods and mortals, which Voluptas uses to persuade Scipio of her powers (15.57–62),

- correspond to the mythological content of Teuthras's song. Venus's description of the decadent lifestyle she has in store for Hannibal (11.400–9) is paralleled by Voluptas' plan for Scipio (15.48–54) and contrasts with Virtus's plan for him (15.109–10, 116–17). For other ways in which Voluptas in this episode recalls Venus, see Marks 2005: 150 n. 100.
- 32 The reference is to their quarrel over Briseis in Homer's *Iliad*. Laelius also condemns the Greeks at Troy for keeping concubines in their tents (15.280–1) and observes that Scipio has treated the offered bride better than the Trojan prophetess Cassandra was treated by the Greeks (15.281–92).
 - 33 Scipio's lament here is modeled after that of Alexander the Great at Achilles' tomb in Sigeum: Cicero, *pro Archia* 24; Plutarch, *Fortuna Alexandri* 15.4–5; Arrian, *Anabasis* 1.12.1.
 - 34 Some have suggested, in fact, that Silius alludes to Ennius through Homer in the Nekyia; for discussion and references, see Marks 2005: 145 n. 84. I may also point out that Silius later acknowledges Laelius's persuasiveness in public speaking and compares it to song (15.455–8).
 - 35 Another of Silius's poet-warriors, Pedianus (12.212–60), has a connection with Cicero too. It has long been recognized that through this fictional character Silius is commemorating Quintus Asconius Pedianus (c. 9 BCE–76 CE), who wrote commentaries on Cicero's speeches.
 - 36 There are, in addition, other connections between these three poet-warriors. Domitian (3.620–2) and Ennius (12.398–400) are both compared to Orpheus; also, cf. 5.461–3 (Murranus), 11.469–80 (Teuthras's song). Domitian (3.612–13) and Cicero (8.408) are both praised in terms reminiscent of Alexander panegyrics; on this, see Ripoll 2000: 151–2. Silius's praise of Domitian's eloquence (3.618–19, quoted above) is echoed in his praise of Cicero's eloquence (8.410–11, also quoted above); see also 12.395, where *decus* is used with reference to Ennius.
 - 37 Martial seems to frame his point in distinctly late republican and Augustan terms: his attempt to disengage Silius from epic poetry smacks of the Callimachean *recusatio* form, and the charge that Silius is lost in the past is perhaps meant to remind us of his epic predecessor Virgil, who writes about Aeneas rather than Augustus in the *Aeneid*. In fact, both of these aspects of the epigram are neatly tied together through the identification of Silius with Virgil and of Martial with Catullus in the poem's last two lines: “sic forsan tener ausus est Catullus / magno mittere Passerem Maroni” (“So perhaps delicate Catullus dared to send his ‘Sparrow’ to great Maro,” 13–14). Also, note the anachronism of these lines: it would have been impossible for Catullus to send his poetry to Virgil because the former died in 58 BCE, when the latter was only 12 years old. It could be, then, that Martial is taking a good-natured jab not only at Silius, but at himself in the poem. After all, who can say which poet is out-of-step with the other? Silius for being the “Virgil” or Martial for being the “Catullus” in this equation?

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The Burden of Mortality: Alexander and the Dead in Persian Epic and Beyond

OLGA M. DAVIDSON

In the history of Persian literature during the medieval period, there was a flourishing revival of old Iranian epic traditions about heroes and kings, which culminated in a monumental poem known as the *Shahnama* or “Book of Kings,” composed by the court poet Ferdowsi, whose name means “Man of Paradise” and whose lifespan is conventionally dated to 940–1019 CE.¹ This epic, which narrates the entire pre-history and history of Iran from its mythological foundations down to the end of the Sasanian dynasty, consistently engages with history. But the question is, how historical is the history that we see in the course of such engagement?

A case in point is Alexander the Great as seen through the lens of Persian epic. This chapter explores how the characterization of this historical figure in the epic of Ferdowsi is shaped by the poetic traditions of Persian epic and mythmaking, which are synthesized, at least partially, with Greek and Egyptian mythmaking traditions that stem from what is known as the *Alexander Romance*. In particular, the focus is on how the *Shahnama* of Ferdowsi imagines Alexander not only historically, as the conqueror of the ancient Persian empire, but also mythologically, as a universal ruler who discovers the futility of his own self-created universe.

Such a visualization stems not only from the perspective of Persian traditions as an antithesis to the perspective of the Greek traditions representing Alexander. It stems also from the perspective of these Greek traditions *as synthesized with the Persian traditions*. Such a synthesis was initiated by the historical Alexander himself in his efforts to merge Iranian and Greek civilizations.² And this synthesis is at work in the Iranian visualization of Alexander as Iskandar, king of the Iranian empire, who is grafted on to the dynastic history of the kings of this empire.

Such Persian variations on the theme of Alexander are shaped by Greek narrative traditions known under the general heading of the *Alexander Romance*, as best represented by a Greek text dating from the third century CE and stemming from

Alexandria in Egypt.³ Besides this text, there are many other surviving versions of the *Alexander Romance*, recorded not only in Greek but also in other languages, including Latin, Syriac, and Armenian.⁴ All these ancient versions, along with the derivative medieval versions recorded mostly in Old French, are relevant to the medieval version found in the Persian epic of the *Shahnama* by Ferdowsi. In this national epic of the Iranian empire, we see a recurrent theme of futility in the stories about the conquests of Alexander/Iskandar, and this theme is linked with the king's recognition of his own mortality, as highlighted by encounters with voices from the dead. Such a theme of futility, as we will see, derives ultimately from older versions of the story of Alexander's conquests – versions that go all the way back to the Greek *Alexander Romance*.

The celebrated book by George Cary about “the medieval Alexander” has this to say about these older versions, as they survive in what he calls the “secular” literature (1956: 190):

I propose [. . .] to deal with the persistence in secular literature of that theme which has been shown to pervade all literature of *exempla*, the futility of man in the face of death, as it appears in secular biographies of Alexander. The existence of this idea is a fundamental fact in the medieval view of Alexander, because it rests upon the simplest of premises. A philosophic judgement of Alexander, to be objective, presupposes some knowledge of his actions, or at the least of his evil actions; but this edifying judgement is based on the simplest possible knowledge because it centers in the pre-eminent fact of Alexander's career, that he was the greatest conqueror ever seen on earth. All anecdotal material about Alexander, directly or indirectly, rests upon this fact, and in starting from this point we start from the simplest possible oral or written tradition. And on this simplest tradition is based the simplest comment that may be made upon it: that Alexander is dead; and with his death his glory has passed away.

In “secular” Persian literary traditions, Alexander is portrayed in a variety of ways. But there is one theme that persists in most versions: after conquering the world, Alexander becomes a pilgrim who journeys on a quest for a better understanding of the past and for definitive answers to metaphysical questions about life and death. He becomes a passive and patient listener to oracles and voices from the otherworld.

In such Persian literary portraits of Alexander, the narrator has ample opportunity to entertain his audience by elaborating on tales of wonder. But there is more to it. The narrator tends to focus on mournful images of a restless conqueror who is haunted by feelings of deep sadness over the futility of his conquests. To quote an example from Beyhaqi (a renowned historian of the Ghaznavid dynasty whose lifespan is dated to 995–1077), Alexander was “a figure of great magnitude, a man of din and clamor, lightning and thunderbolts, as if he were a rain cloud in spring and summer that passed over the sovereigns of the earth, shed its burden, and disappeared” (Beyhaqi, ed. Fayyāz 1971: 113).

Such a mournful image is influenced by “non-secular” narratives in ancient commentaries on the Koran, especially with reference to the apocalyptic figure of Dhu'l Qarnayn, whose name means “the one with the two horns.” This Dhu'l

Qarnayn, whose character is actually based on the character of Alexander as featured in the ancient Greek narratives about Alexander, is paired with Solomon in the Koranic commentaries, and the two of them are pictured as kingly figures who are firm and faithful believers in monotheism, that is, they are *mo'men* as opposed to the kingly figures of Nimrod and Nebuchadnezzar, who are non-believers or *kāfar*. Both Sunni and Shi'ite commentaries concur in these characterizations.

Here is an example from an ancient Sunni commentary or *tafsir*, the so-called *Tafsir-e Surâbâdi*. This *tafsir* is in response to the Koranic "Sura of the Cave" (18: 83–110), where we read "They will ask you about Dhu'l-Qarnayn." The answer to the question is as follows:

When Dhu'l Qarnayn had conquered the world, he sat down once, and thought of death and began to shed tears profusely. They asked him: "What has befallen the king?" He said, "O woe to death, that one must ultimately die. I left no trick and stratagem untried until I conquered the entire world. Do you know any tricks to counter death?" The sages said: "There are no ways out of death except if you drink the water of life if you can find it." He said: "Where do you go for that?" They said: "Into the darkness." (Mahdawî and Bayânî 1968: 223–4)

Here is another example, from a Shi'ite commentary:

They asked Amir al-mo'menin 'Ali whether Dhu'l Qarnayn was a king or a prophet. He answered: "He was a good creature of God. He loved God and God loved him, and he preached the way of the Lord and God advised him" [khodây râ dust dasht va khodâ u râ dust dasht; va nasihat kard barây-e khodâ, khodâ u râ nasihat kard]. (Huqûqî 1970: 422)

As we see from these two passages from Koranic commentaries, Dhu'l-Qarnayn is figured as a friend of God, almost like his more successful companion, the immortal Khezr, in spite of his own failure to reach the waters of life in his quest for immortality. A similar characterization is evident in a literary form that is closely associated with the Koranic commentaries, that is, in the popular *Qissas al-anbiyâ'* (*Stories of the Prophets*).

Being a friend of God, Dhu'l-Qarnayn needs no intermediaries and advisers, since he is in direct communion with God Himself. So, Dhu'l-Qarnayn has come a long way from the prototype that originally shaped him, the figure of Alexander in the ancient Greek narratives about him. But it would be wrong to read too stark a dichotomy into the differences between Dhu'l-Qarnayn and Alexander. Taking medieval Persian narrative as a whole, including courtly literature, popular prose fiction, and narratives embedded in religious texts, popular and learned, we see a wealth of shared characteristics and common sources, featuring a veritable arsenal of motifs and anecdotal incidents designed to entertain as well as instruct the audience.

That said, we can now turn from the "non-secular" narratives about the figure of Dhu'l Qarnayn in the Koranic commentary traditions to the earlier "secular" narratives about the figure of Alexander himself.

These “secular” narratives are most clearly visible in the Persian epic traditions as represented by the *Shahnama* of Ferdowsi. I now proceed to examine some relevant passages from this “secular” literature. These passages derive primarily from episodes dealing with Alexander’s visits to ancient royal tombs. A pervasive theme in these episodes is that Alexander hears chilling warnings from beyond the grave.

In the first example I have chosen, Alexander is warned about his own death. After a series of military conquests, and having dealt a fiery death to a dragon who was blocking his way while he was ascending a mountain, he now ascends another mountain and finds a golden throne placed high on a desolate peak. A corpse is seated on the throne, appearing as if he still enjoyed divine glory even after death. A silk brocade covers him like a shroud, while precious gems of all kinds are encrusted on his crown. All around him are piles of gold and silver, but no one dares come near him. Whoever ventures up that mountain to seek something from him becomes afflicted with fear and trembling, and dies on the spot. Having ascended the mountain and having approached the throne, Alexander now contemplates the corpse seated on the opulent throne and hears a voice saying:

“O King! You have spent many a year in this world, and overthrown many a throne and raised your head to the firmaments; many a friend and foe have you destroyed: but now it is time for you to forsake the world!” (*Shahnama* VII: 73)

The framing narrative then observes:

The royal countenance was enflamed by this voiced message and returned from that mountain, with a heavy heart. (Ibid.)⁵

In the second example, Alexander is again warned about his death – this time, by a corpse with a boar’s head. As in the first example, this corpse too has a silk brocade shroud stretched over it, and the description is phrased in parallel wording (VII: 87). Particularly striking are the following parallelisms:

[from the first example] ze dibâ kashideh bar-u châdori (from silk brocade a shroud was stretched over him) (VII: 73, line 1226);

[from the second example] kashideh ze dibâ bar-u châdori (from silk brocade a shroud was stretched over him) (VII: 87, line 1482).

As in the first example, the corpse in the second example is forbidding. It says to Alexander:

All those who rush there greedily to help themselves to the precious offerings suffer from violent trembling and die on the spot.⁶

The corpse with a head of a boar continues:

O covetous man, don't be so frenzied
 You have seen so much of what no one else has seen.
 Now you must rein in your horse.
 Your life is shortened now
 And your royal throne strays without a king.

(VII: 166)

These harsh words will haunt Alexander. When he least expects it, he will be reminded again of his futile quest for something he does not even understand – and of the violence that it causes. He has not taken responsibility for what he has conquered. He just destroys and then moves on to the next objective, all out of some unexplained drive for whatever is more, whatever is new.

When Alexander encounters a talking tree, its branches utter various warnings and observations that reinforce the message of the boar-headed corpse. One branch says:

Why is Alexander always on a quest in this world?
 Who has ever managed to reap any benefits from this world?
 When twice seven years from his reign have passed
 He must leave his throne of greatness.

(VII: 90)

And another branch says:

In this wide world
 You struggle out of greed and excess.
 Why do you torture your soul in this way?
 Your particular form of concupiscence is to roam the world and
 To torment whomever and kill kings.
 You haven't much time left here.
 Do not darken and narrow your own days.

(Ibid.)

Then comes the conclusion:

Soon your death will come to you in the land of others.
 Your ruling star, crown, and throne will have had enough of you.

(Ibid.)

In a related episode, when Alexander challenges the Faghfur or “Emperor” of China, his adversary is not frightened by Alexander's threat and says:

Don't make yourself more or better than they are [= those that
 Alexander had vanquished].
 Although you are iron, no doubt you too will pass.
 Where are Faridun, Zakhāk, and Jamshid?
 They stormed in like that wind and then petered out like a sigh.

(VII: 94)⁷

The Faghfur not only reminds Alexander that he will die, despite all his threats, but also prophesies that, when Alexander does die, there will be nothing left.

Later on in the narrative of the *Shahnama*, Alexander devastates Sind, that is, India. When the weeping old men, women, and children of the defeated land approach Alexander and ask for his mercy, they too echo what the boar-headed corpse had said when they now say:

O wakeful King, show some self-restraint.
 Don't scorch our lands and kill our children.
 For in the end, your days too shall pass.
 Happy is he who does not crush this world with cruelty.

(VII: 97)

There is an added twist here. By pleading with Alexander not to devastate their land, be it cultivated or uncultivated, nor to kill their children, the refugees ask him not to render them sterile or kill off their race. This theme of sterility is relevant to another: that Alexander himself will die with no heir. In these terms the plea of the people of Sind is a plea to Alexander not to make them like him.

This theme of sterility recurs elsewhere in the *Shahnama*. At one point in the epic narrative, Alexander becomes so obsessed with his mortality that he decides to write a letter to his mentor, Aristotle, in which he declares that, since he will die soon, he plans to kill anyone of "Keyanid" descent – which is a stylized way of referring to all the dynasties that preceded his own would-be dynasty. The people of Sind had begged him not to do such a thing. Aristotle is horrified and, in his reply, advises Alexander not to do that but to give alms and do good deeds instead, since

We belong to death from the day we were born.
 We give our hearts helplessly to it.⁸
 Nobody has taken with him his kingship.
 He who has departed leaves his greatness to another.

(VII: 110)

Aristotle then recommends that Alexander appoint chieftains among both the Rumi or "Greek" dynasts and their "Keyanid" or Persian counterparts on equal terms to take the reins of his kingdom after he dies, knowing full well that Alexander will leave a shattered legacy and chaos behind.

It is important to bear in mind the traditional chronological space occupied by the Macedonian conqueror in the narrative of the *Shahnama*, between the deposed King Darâ of the "Keyanid" dynasty on the one hand and the future King Ardeshir of the Sasanian dynasty on the other. The narrative here skips a vast span of real historical time, including the whole dynasty of the Arsacids.⁹ This span, for reasons that do not concern us here, is compressed in the *Shahnama* into a small narrative space containing not much more than lists and desultory remarks. In this way, Alexander's short reign and sudden death herald a long period of political malaise and decay for Iran before its resurgence under the new young prince who founds

the dynasty of the Sasanians, Ardeshir. If Alexander reeks of death, Ardeshir will be the harbinger of a new and long-lasting dynasty, a sign of both consolidation and fertility.

This point was not lost on Ferdowsi's near contemporary, Beyhaqi, who, in the context of the passage already quoted, contrasts the two monarchs Alexander and Ardeshir to the detriment of the older figure.

Aristotle's response to Alexander's anguish, couched in terms of a blueprint for the future of his conquered lands, insures the creation of many competing rulers, the so-called *moluk-al-tawâ'if* or "tribal kings." And it also insures the survival of the Rumi or "Greeks" in the midst of chaos elsewhere.

Knowing that he is about to die, Alexander instructs his mother to take care of his corpse: he is to be embalmed in Egypt. In this context, he mentions his ambitions should he have any progeny from his Persian wife Roshanak – of which there is no chance! He wants a son to carry on after him and, if he has a daughter, she should marry *tokhmeh Filqus*, that is, someone from "the seed of Filqus," someone who is descended from Philip of Macedon. We see here a hint of serious worrying about the continuation of the lineage of Alexander. Then Alexander gives his request for a suitable coffin and shroud – replete with vast quantities of gold.

In saying that he wants to be embalmed in Egypt, Alexander is asking for the equivalent of mummification. In terms of ancient Egyptian religion, the mummification of Alexander in the Greek version of the *Alexander Romance*, which is itself of Egyptian provenience, is a sign of his promised immortalization after death (Payne 1991; Nagy 2001). In the Greek version, Alexander dreams of a corpse in Egypt, which turns out to be his own mummy, and which is a sign of a promise that he will come back to life eschatologically just as Osiris the primordial mummy will come back to life – and just as the books with which his body makes contact (he is entombed within the space of the Alexandrian Library) will come back to life each time a book is read (Nagy 2001).

In the Greek narrative of the *Alexander Romance*, we find many earlier variations on the theme of Alexander's recognition of his own mortality, but this theme is not nearly as explicitly elaborated in the Greek versions as it is in the Iranian versions. True, hints at this theme are not lacking, for example, in the episode about Alexander and the springs of the water of life (2.39.10–40.6) or his visit to the haunts where Persian royalty used to live (3.28.10–14), and we may continue to think of this theme as a synthesis of Greek and Iranian narrative traditions. Still, the melancholic aspect of this theme, highlighting the futility of a king's seemingly boundless successes, seems to be distinctly Persian. We see a comparable attestation of such a distinctly Persian theme from a far earlier period, in the account of Herodotus (7.45–6) about the feelings expressed by the Persian King of Kings Xerxes at the height of his successes. At the very moment when he has just bridged the Hellespont and is contemplating the enormous army he has collected to invade Greece, he begins to weep at the thought that he and all his army are still mortal and will one day be dead: at the climax of his career as a conqueror, his thoughts turn to mortality.¹⁰

The distinctly Persian theme of Alexander's mortality as a clear sign of the futility of all his successes is brought home perhaps most forcefully in the narrative of the *Shahnama* in a lament performed by Alexander's Persian wife Roshanak after his death. Her words sum up most powerfully what is relevant:

Like a strong wind cloud or hail storm: you were like a fast moving cloud,
bearing hail.
You were protected from death, I would say. You appeared to me as
if you were immune from death.
You scattered the foe with so much battle and combat and bloodshed.
You indulged so much in battle, fighting, and bloodshed,
Either alone or sometimes with an army.
Fate had given you safe conduct, I thought,
And you had kept this agreement secret from your own men.
You have emptied the world of its great men
And have cast off the crown of your kingship.
The tree which you planted came to fruit
And now I see that dust has become your sole confidant.

(VII: 110)

Here, then, is Alexander as an invincible brute who caused untold damage. The wife is saying in her lament: now that you are dead, you are not the king. It was a disaster for you to be you.

The words of the lamenting wife of Alexander amount to an elaboration of the theme that was first articulated by the figure of the boar-headed corpse. By now we see that this mystical corpse, the boar-headed shape of which is unique in Ferdowsi's poetry, is a prefiguration of Alexander's own body. It is a Macedonian body (a clear sign is the boar's head of Macedonian boar-hunters) that is fused with the Egyptian body featured in the Greek version of the *Alexander Romance*. In an Iranian context, the corpse with a boar's head is a synthesis, a multivalent cipher, with Egyptian as well as Macedonian features: it is the Egyptian mummy of the king of the Macedonians, who is their chief boar-hunter.

At the end of this Persian narrative about Alexander, the master narrator of the *Shahnama* sums up Alexander's life this way:

Such is the custom of the ancient house (world).
Alexander has gone but remains here in word.
Although he killed thirty-six kings,
Look at what he has from the world in his fist.

(VII: 111)

These cryptic words at the end allude to a famous *exemplum*: at the funeral of Alexander, story has it, his hand reached out from his coffin, showing all the world that it was empty. The story of this stylized mummy is told in the *Kheradnâma* of Jami (whose lifespan is dated to 1414–92). In his last will and testament, Alexander

says that he wants his hand to remain outside the coffin so that people may see that even a great king like him died empty-handed – and that they may realize the futility of it all (Tarbiat 1999: 511). After the death of Alexander, he is lamented by ten sages, and the lamenting words of the third sage echo what we have read in Beyhaqi: Alexander's reign was but a passing cloud, something utterly transient (ibid. 515–16, lines 2038–43).

I highlight one last time this image about the passing cloud, which marked the beginning of this chapter and can now mark the ending as well. It is a theme of transience and futility that echoes even in the historical tradition. The celebrated historian Abu'l-Mansur Tha'libi, in his *History of the Kings of Persia* (*Ghorar akhbār moluk al-fors*), describes the moment when Ptolemy (Batlamiyus), on the occasion of Alexander's funeral in Egypt, chooses these words to sum up the life and times of Alexander as his kingly predecessor: "Behold how the dreamer's reverie has come to an end and the cloud's shadow has vanished" (Zotenberg 1900: 450–1).

Such Persian representations of Alexander, especially as we see them in the epic *Shahnama* of Ferdowsi, have a bearing on historical figures in the life and times of Ferdowsi himself. One such historical figure is the would-be patron of Ferdowsi, Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (998–1030 CE). The actions of Alexander as described in the epic, especially his conquests in Sind, are made parallel to the historical facts of Mahmud's raids into India – actions that he undertook as the self-declared Sunni Defender of the Faith.¹¹

The parallels as well as the differences between Mahmud and Alexander were surely not lost on panegyrists working for Mahmud. They conventionally compared the two monarchs by way of a rhetorical ploy, declaring that, as magnificent as Alexander may have been, he was still a dwarf compared to Mahmud. In terms of this ploy, Alexander's by then old story seemed less grand than the new adventures of Mahmud in the land of the infidels. In the context of the comparison implicit in the *Shahnama* of Ferdowsi, we detect that Mahmud was like Alexander in treating the native populations in India with wanton ruthlessness. A case in point is his smashing of "idols" in temples, a gesture that served as a propagandistic cover for widespread looting in the case of Mahmud's conquering armies.¹²

In the comparisons of Mahmud with Alexander, we see a second level in the relationship between the epic and history: epic is relevant not only to the historical past but also to the historical present – as epic sees it. Epic views history not historically but on its own terms. Epic stands ready to render judgment on history. In the case of Alexander, whether the judgment rendered on him by the epic of Ferdowsi is historically correct is another question.

Notes

- 1 On the status of the *Shahnama* as "epic," see Davidson 2005. In my references to passages from the *Shahnama*, I use the Moscow edition of Bertels 1960–71. All references are to pages in vol. VII.

- 2 For a most incisive historical analysis of Greek and Iranian cultural synthesis as promoted by the conquests of Alexander the Great, see the work of Briant 1996 (2002); also Briant 2003.
- 3 I single out the exemplary edition of a fifteenth-century Leiden manuscript of this text by van Thiel 1983. For a brief introduction to the textual history, see Payne 1991: 165–6.
- 4 For background, I cite the introduction by Stoneman 1991 to his English translation of the Greek *Alexander Romance*. For a thorough collection of relevant texts, with commentary, see Stoneman 2008.
- 5 For similar examples from the poetry of Nezâmi, see Fouchécour 1999 and Beelaert 1999.
- 6 The wording in the two examples is again parallel. (To be compared are the two lines in VII: 73, lines 1228–9 and 87, lines 1485–6.)
- 7 In Iranian mythology, Jamshid is a prototypical ruler who organizes Iranian society, but his rule is followed by the tyranny of Zakhāk, a prototypical demon who terrorizes the realm of Iran until he is overthrown by Feridun, the prototypical founder of dynastic kingship. Survey in Davidson 2006: 12–13.
- 8 In other words, we have no choice.
- 9 The Achaemenid Persian Empire from its founder, Cyrus the Great, to Darius III who was defeated by Alexander, lasted from c. 550 to 331 BCE. The Arsacid dynasty created the Parthian Empire and ruled from c. 250 BCE to 225 CE. The Sasanian dynasty assumed power in 227 CE.
- 10 I owe this reference to David Konstan.
- 11 For an analysis of the historical as well as the mythologized relationship of Mahmud as patron and Ferdowsi as his panegyrist, see Davidson 2006: 16, 31–3.
- 12 For a full discussion of the historical background about Mahmud as thus represented by Ferdowsi, see Shahbazi 1991: 2, 52, 83–103.

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Slavic Epic: Past Tales and Present Myths*

SUSANA TORRES PRIETO

Slavic epic is, in fact, something of a misnomer. By “Slavic” we designate first and foremost one of the major branches of the Indo-European family of languages, while “epic” is a type of composition which, more often than not, deals with foundational or national myths. No texts have survived in which both characteristics, Slavic and epic, were concurrent. We do not have any written accounts dating to the time of the unified Slavic proto-language. Writing arrived late to Slavic-speaking peoples, only after they had abandoned their original homeland and spread across the land between Europe and Asia that is nowadays mostly populated by speakers of languages of the Slavic family.¹ Unfortunately, too, none of the literate peoples with whom the Slavs had contact recorded a hypothetical Common Slavic Epic.

We therefore have no such thing as a long Slavic epic poem narrating a foundational myth, either in written form or somehow preserved in oral form. In fact, what we refer to nowadays as “Slavic epic” are speculative and partial reconstructions of certain aspects of purported common oral epic poetry, such as the type of verse or the characteristics of performance. Not only are we dealing, then, with an uncertain, reconstructed tradition, but such reconstruction is founded only upon late written evidence from only two of the three linguistic areas of Slavic (South and East Slavic); there is little or no evidence of any West Slavic epic.²

Bleak as this outlook might seem, there is still much to be said about epics written or performed in Slavic languages, and how they functioned, in the distant as well as in the more recent past, in the societies that produced them and kept them alive.

Past Tales

Within the sphere of Slavic languages, we can attest with a relative degree of certainty only to the existence of written epic poems in East Slavic, produced in medieval

times in the territories that have come to be known as the Kievan Rus' or Early Rus' principalities.³ If such written production also existed in other areas, such as the Balkans, we have only second-hand notices of it (Koljević 1980: 2–4, 11–13, 30–2). In any case, no written specimen of South Slavic epic was transmitted prior to the collections taken down directly from singers in the nineteenth century. The paucity of written production and its limitation to the east area within the Slavic realm was to a certain extent compensated for by translations of various epic works originating elsewhere, manuscripts of which circulated among various Slavic-speaking peoples well into the eighteenth century.

The reconstructed tradition

During the second half of the nineteenth century, following the emergence of what came to be known as Pan-Slavism, a powerful idea penetrated literary studies. This idea was based on the assumption that Slavic was more than a linguistic concept: it was an ideological and cultural and, to a large extent, also a religious one (Conte 1986: 613–45; Jakobson 1953: 1–5; 1954; Potebnja 1914). Philological studies of Church Slavonic showed clearly that manuscripts of religious works in Slavonic were produced, circulated and read, at least for several hundred years, from Kiev to Mount Athos and from Ohrid to Novgorod. This large sphere of cultural exchange excluded the Western Slavic peoples, who had adopted the Western rite instead of the Eastern one, and therefore a script based on Latin characters instead of the Cyrillic-based Old Slavonic script.⁴ The areas that followed the Eastern Church of Byzantium engaged in longer-lasting cultural exchange, the full impact of which is yet to be assessed. It is precisely this area that has yielded sufficient material to encourage a reconstruction of Slavic oral epic.

Nevertheless, before we can list those common features, several cautionary remarks need to be made. The reconstruction of oral epic has been based upon *modern* material, that is, upon poems that were for the most part collected between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. Before audio recordings could be used, this process of collection had to rely on the honesty and accuracy of the collectors. Fortunately, their transcripts, in general, compare quite well with the later phonographic records. Although it is unlikely that the characteristics we shall examine migrated in either direction within the two traditions to be compared, South and East Slavic, we can neither pinpoint the exact date when these characteristics took shape nor be sure that they were present early enough to postulate a common origin for them.

First of all, there is what Roman Jakobson (1952, 1953) called Slavic epic verse, or rather, verses. By comparing the surviving oral epic traditions in both areas, he came to the conclusion that there had been two asymmetrical epic verses – a long one, the famous decasyllable, or *deseterac*, consisting of two cola (between six and four syllables each), and a short epic verse (between five and three syllables each). To that we can add certain compositional techniques – for example, the negative

comparison – and perhaps some compositional elements, such as the feminine lament.⁵ The morphological analysis of the poems and the systematic study of motifs, formulas and themes (*sinzhets* in Russian academia), proved fruitful in encouraging comparative studies on common Slavic stock elements or repertoires (Jakobson and Szeftel 1949; Lord 1954; Vesterholt 1973). However, as further analysis has shown, some of these supposedly common elements are not as evident as they were claimed to be, others can be considered to be literary universals, and still others could be the result of translations of heroic literature. At any rate, all these elements, jointly or separately, force us to reconsider some evidence that has thus far been taken for granted by scholars who apply conclusions reached in one area to another or engage in speculative comparisons but ignore chronological and functional differences.

We can tentatively reconstruct a common epic verse, certain shared topics – such as the often-mentioned rescue of a bride, although this is not necessarily an original Slavic motif (Lord 1954: 381–3; Vesterholt 1973: 52ff) – and certain compositional techniques (mentioned below), but there are no heroes or plots common to both oral traditions which would allow us to postulate a common origin for any text. In oral traditions, some plots seem to share some elements (such as Mikhailo Potyk in the Russian and Baš Ćelik in Serbian and Macedonian traditions), but the heroes are not identical, and the common elements do not amount to full plots. We are therefore dealing with national and geographically as well as chronologically localized traditions. Even to the most adventurous critics, it would seem hazardous to go any further. It is difficult to use comparison to isolate purely Slavic elements, for two reasons: on the one hand, it is almost impossible to determine precisely when a common Indo-European or, indeed, a universal theme becomes particularly Slavic; on the other, the arrival of literacy exposed all Slavic traditions to the same possible outside influences. Hence, when we think we are seeing a common pattern, we might actually be seeing various adaptations of a non-Slavic model received at different times.

Translations, mutatis mutandis

These non-Slavic epic models arrived, at least partially, in translation. The number of translations of non-Slavic epics that were produced and circulated in the Slavic-speaking world is remarkable. This is not surprising, however, given that translations represented 90 percent of the total output of written texts during the first five centuries of literary activity in Slavic languages (tenth to fifteenth centuries; Marti 2003: 676). From the time when manuscript production and copying first became widespread in *Slavia Orthodoxa*⁶ and well into the seventeenth century, translations of various epic works were made and circulated within the realm of Slavic-speaking peoples. These included Pseudo-Callisthenes' text of the *Alexander Romance*, Guido delle Colonne's *Historia destructionis Troiae*, Flavius Josephus's *Jewish War*, and, in certain areas, adaptations of the Byzantine romance of *Digenis Akritas*. Some of these works arrived initially as parts of other works, usually chronicles,⁷ and not as

functionally independent epic works, while others were adapted even to the point of losing their title, or were preserved only in oral tradition.⁸

The degree of adaptation of these works varied and so, accordingly, did their role in the development of epic Slavic models. In general, when they were embedded in chronicles, the translation was quite faithful to the original (the first translations of the *Alexander Romance*, for example). The process of adaptation seems to have been more conscious, including additions or the abridgement of some sections, when the epic work was independent (Josephus' *Jewish War*, Guido delle Colonne's *Historia destructionis Troiae*) though its historical background apparently prevented a free use of the materials, which seems to have been the case when the tale was perceived as ahistorical (*Digenis Akritas*, *Boeve de Haumtone*).⁹ The influence of these translations could range from the appropriation of formulas to the reception of themes that were later reworked in oral tradition.

Written epos

As mentioned above, evidence of medieval epic writing exists only in the East Slavic area, in the area of the Early Rus' principalities. In the view of specialists, the number of works that can be included in this analysis differs greatly. Essential to this question is an ongoing debate on generic classifications in Early Rus' literature, which swings between diachronic definitions and synchronic descriptions, between interpretation and categorization. While from a formalist point of view some would include military tales alongside epic texts, others, adopting a socio-cultural and functional perspective, would situate the latter closer to princely panegyrics.¹⁰

The epic of the losers: the Igor Tale

The *Slovo o Polku Igoreve*,¹¹ also known as the *Tale* (or *Lay*) of *Igor's Campaign*, or simply the *Igor Tale*, is in medieval East Slavic literature the work that has received the highest proportion of scholarship per written word, and this not only due to the fact that its authenticity has been challenged repeatedly.¹² The problem is really twofold: its only known manuscript perished in the Moscow fire of 1812, and the text, as it is known today, does not seem to fit within the universe of Russian epics as we know it. Neither of these problems, however, is impossible to overcome.

The *Igor Tale* narrates the defeat of Prince Igor of Novgorod-Seversk by the Polovtsians in the year 1185, a historical fact also attested in various redactions of the *Russian Primary Chronicle*.¹³ We only have an edition made in 1800 of the sixteenth-century manuscript belonging to the collection of Count Musin-Pushkin and a copy of the same manuscript, made for the Empress Catherine II the Great between 1795 and 1796. Musin-Pushkin's manuscript, which also contained other works (Jakobson 1966: 106–8),¹⁴ supposedly perished in the Moscow fire in 1812. Since the poem shares many features with another milestone of Russian epic, the

Zadonshchina, which narrates the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380 and has survived in at least six manuscripts, there has been much discussion on whether the direction of influence went from the *Igor Tale* to the *Zadonshchina* or vice versa.¹⁵ Given that the historical events narrated in the latter were chronologically later, and since the *Igor Tale* was “peculiar” in comparison with other surviving epics, the theory of forgery began to gain followers. The *Tale* was located, furthermore, at the end of the manuscript, another reason why the defenders of the forgery theory thought it was “added.” As a result of this controversy, the poem has been analyzed from all possible points of view, from folklore to semiotics.

Linguistic evidence, however, seems to have settled the question, at least for the moment. Improved knowledge of the language of the late twelfth century, stemming in large part from evidence found in birch bark documents in Novgorod, leaves little doubt about the poem’s authenticity. The experts who defend its genuineness argue, in a nutshell, that no forger could have come up with the forms of certain words attested in the copy at that stage of linguistic evolution, which precedes the composition of the *Zadonshchina*.¹⁶ That said, it is much more difficult to provide a date of composition. Arguing, for example, that the poem must have been written no later than 1 October 1187, the date of the death of Prince Igor’s father-in-law, Yaroslav Osmomysl of Galich, who is mentioned in the *Igor Tale* as still living (verse 130), implies a gross misunderstanding of compositional techniques outside historiography. Zalizniak (2004: 30–2) concludes on the basis of linguistic evidence that the *Igor Tale* was composed at the end of the twelfth or beginning of the thirteenth century and copied in the northwest region in the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries.

The other problem to be resolved was the poem’s “peculiarity.” Unlike the oral epics, but like the *Zadonshchina*, it was not written in verse, but in rhythmic prose,¹⁷ and only a tenth of the whole text actually describes the attested events of 1185. The *Tale* is a dramatic account of the defeat, highly lyrical in many passages (particularly the lament of Jaroslavna), with lavish imagery abundant in comparisons with animals and natural phenomena. It does not follow a linear account of events, and the references to Christianity, although present (particularly in vv. 163, 214–18), are less relevant than in other, possibly later, epic texts. Even so, the poem is far from representing a completely pre-Christian society because, although references are made to pagan gods (Veles v. 17; Stribog v. 48; Dazhbog vv. 64 and 76; Khors v. 159) as well as oneiromancy (vv. 93–102) and omens (vv. 27–9, 44), there are also clear allusions to Christian thought: nobody can escape the judgement of God (v. 163); it is God who shows Igor the way back home (v. 184), and, most importantly for considering the *Igor Tale* an epic poem, antagonists are addressed as infidels or pagans (vv. 41, 78, 87, 132, 217). Of all these verses containing a clear Christian component – to which we could add various references to churches (vv. 63, 160, 213) – only vv. 41 and 132 are also present in the *Zadonshchina*.

On the other hand, although it seems difficult to understand what the purpose would have been of composing a lay about the defeat of a minor prince, when the coalition of Russian princes united under the leadership of Grand Prince Sviatoslav

Vsevolodich of Kiev had just inflicted a serious defeat on the Polovtsians only the year before (1184), capturing several of the khans and other notables, it is no less true that the *Igor Tale* is neither the only example of a pessimistic medieval epic (the *Chanson de Roland* is another; see Bossy and Duggan, this volume) nor even the only Slavic example of this kind: the cycle of Kosovo, for instance, focuses on the Serbian defeat in the battle of Kosovo and on the tragic destiny of prince Lazar (see Foley, this volume).

What is more startling is the choice of the historical event. The expedition of Igor Sviatoslavich was on no account politically or militarily relevant. The Battle of the River Kalka in 1223, where the combined armies of Chernigov, Kiev, and Galicia, together with Polovtsian troops, were for the first time defeated by the Mongols, would have offered a more obvious framework for such a sorrowful epic composition. The main questions to be asked, therefore, are why, for whom, and with what aim was the *Igor Tale* composed.

Be all this as it may – the lyric tone, the narration of a defeat, the low emphasis placed on the defense of religion – the truth is that a better path to resolving the paradox of the epic qualities of the *Igor Tale* lies in changing the terms of the paradox. Instead of insisting on forgery theories because the poem does not fit our preconceived parameters of the genre (or of what the epic genre came to imply), perhaps a more promising approach is to rethink our *a priori* conceptions of genre definitions and to allow room for the possibility that such a genre evolved into a more deeply religious and state-conscious form of expression than circumstances at the end of the twelfth century in Rus' would have permitted or, indeed, required.

The epic of the winners: the Kulikovo Cycle

Nearly two centuries later, another historical event, the Battle of Kulikovo Field, prompted the composition of the greatest epic cycle in Russian medieval literature. In 1380, the Mongol army of the Golden Horde led by Mamai was defeated by the combined forces of various Russian territories led by the grand prince of Moscow and Vladimir, Dmitrii Ivanovich, who, because the battleground was situated on the banks of the river Don, earned the sobriquet of Donskoi. The cycle consists of two independent epic works, the *Zadonschchina* ("the battle beyond the Don"),¹⁸ and the *Tale of the Battle Against Mamai*, both in prose, as well as a chronicle account of the events, as was also the case with the events narrated in the *Igor Tale*. It was traditionally accepted that the *Zadonschchina* was written shortly after the battle, before the city of Trnovo, capital of the Second Bulgarian Empire and mentioned in the epic as a stronghold of Christianity, had fallen to the Turks in 1393 (Jakobson and Worth 1966: 540–2). Watermark analysis of the oldest manuscripts, however, confirms that none of them can be placed before the last quarter of the fifteenth century (Kuchkin 1998: 88, 95–6).

Regarding its authorship, a certain Sofonii of Riazan is mentioned in the colophons of two manuscripts.¹⁹ Since these belong to different branches of the

stemma, it is possible that Sofonii was the author of an archetype, now lost, from which they both derive (Vaillant 1967: viii–ix). This hypothesis is reinforced by the fact that the short redaction, including certain addenda, is not simply an abridged version of the long one (Zimin 1966). Attention has turned lately to the role played by the copyist of the oldest, short redaction of the work, Efrosin, from the *scriptorium* of the monastery of Kirillo-Belozerskii, not only in his capacity as copyist but also as editor and maybe creator of certain epic compositions (Romanchuk 2007: 197–237; Bobrov 2005, 2006, 2008).

The *Tale of the Battle Against Mamai* was undoubtedly composed after the *Zadonshchina*, from which it borrows quotations. We have nine main redactions and more than a hundred copies, and the earliest manuscripts date to the early sixteenth century.²⁰ The *Tale of the Battle* is much more detailed and lacks the poetic and lyric digressions that situate the *Zadonshchina* far closer to the *Tale of Igor's Campaign* than to the *Tale of the Battle Against Mamai*. The latter emphasizes even more insistently that the fight against the pagans was waged in defense of the Motherland and of Christianity, and it clearly identifies Moscow as a stronghold of Christianity. This equation of the defense of the Motherland and the Christian faith is also typical, as we will see, of Russian oral heroic poems, the *byliny*. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the *Tale's* different tone – it abounds in biblical quotations and contextualizes the victory over the Mongols within a prearranged divine plan – corresponds to the political agenda of the rise of Moscow in the second half of the fifteenth century (Garzaniti 2006). If there was an evolution of the epic genre in Rus', from the *Igor Tale* through the *Zadonshchina* to the *Tale of the Battle Against Mamai*, it clearly would have moved from a more lyrical and less religious form to a more factual, consciously religious, and state-oriented form.

Along with these three main works, quite a large number of “epic passages” are found in the chronicles (the *Tale about the Ruin of the Russian Land*, and the texts that have been collectively known as the *Riazan' Cycle*),²¹ whose classification as epic largely depends on whether it is made on the grounds of content (they all narrate military deeds, and should therefore be included) or function (the narratives originally conceived for inclusion in the chronicles or as princely panegyrics were created with neither the same function and aim nor using the same stylistic devices as epic, and should therefore be excluded). It is, nonetheless, noteworthy that the descriptions of certain princes, like Andrei Bogolubskii or Prince Roman of Galich, included in thirteenth-century chronicles, are remarkably similar to those of the epic heroes of oral poetry, the *bogatyri*, as they enter into battle to defeat their enemies single-handed.²² We could also include in this group the *Narrative of the Pious Prince Dovmont and his Courage* and the *Heroic Deeds of Mercurius of Smolensk*, which were written probably as early as the fourteenth century. Perhaps the most representative of these princely biographies embedded in the chronicles is the *Life of Alexander Nevski*, a grandiloquent panegyric of the prince's life, endowed with all the typical characteristics of a great warrior and saint.²³

The East Slavic written epic follows a highly typical pattern: a historical event prompts the composition of an almost always glorifying and deeply Christian literary

tale, parallel to its annalistic account, that invariably reflects the struggle between the Motherland and foreign pagan enemies. These texts have survived, whether or not they were originally created in written form, as independent units and self-contained compositions. The relation of this type of epic to history should thus be clear: history provides an argument that literature embellishes for the glorification of present or past rulers, always in the service of a propagandistic aim.

*Surviving Slavic traditions: the Russian oral epic*²⁴

The byliny

*Byliny*²⁵ (singular *bylina*) is the conventional name given to Russian oral heroic poems.²⁶ The poems, known to those who sang them as *stariny*, “old songs,” were first collected in northern Russia, in the province of Olonets, in the 1860s, and their collection continued until the 1930s in the regions near Lake Ladoga. They share a particular verse type, and we can infer that they were originally not only recited but sung, both from their verse pattern and because recordings, if only of some stanzas, were made at the end of the nineteenth century (Grigor’ev 1904). Of around 3,000 collected transcriptions of the *byliny*, approximately 2,000 have been published. These 3,000 transcriptions, however, do not correspond to 3,000 different poems, since many are fragmentary or correspond to different variants of the same poem, transcribed from different singers, or from the same singer at different times. The *byliny* usually contain between 200 and 400 verses or lines, although some can reach 1,000 lines. They have no rhyme or stanza patterns, but rather follow a stress pattern (long epic line) usually concluding in a two-syllable ending or “clausula” at the termination of each verse.

The corpus of *byliny* has traditionally been divided into cycles: the mythological cycle, the Kiev cycle, and the Novgorod cycle. The first cycle comprises heroes who seem to have extraordinary characteristics: Sviatogor, who is a giant riding slowly towards his own death; Mikula Selianovich, a mighty ploughman who ploughs at a miraculous speed; and Volkh Vseslavevich, who is able to metamorphose himself and his retinue into animals to conquer a foreign kingdom. The poems of the Kievan cycle, the largest of the three, mainly narrate the adventures of various heroes (*bogatyri*) who travel to the court of Kiev to prove themselves or narrate their own deeds. Among the most famous heroes, who are the protagonists of the greatest number of versions, are Il’ia Muromets, Dobrynia Nikitich and Alesha Popovich. Other minor heroes of the Kievan cycle are Mikhailo Potyk, Dunai and Diuk Stepanovich. The Novgorod cycle groups together the adventures of Sadko and Vasilii Buslaev, two sailors from this merchant city who undertake unusual trips. Sadko travels underwater to the realm of the King of the Sea, while Vasilii Buslaev meets his death upon returning from a pilgrimage to Constantinople.

The Kievan *byliny* show certain constant characteristics that differentiate them from *byliny* of the other two groups.²⁷ Their protagonists are lonely heroes – except

for Alesha Popovich, who is accompanied by his squire, Ekim – whose travels always have the Kievan court as their point of departure or arrival. This court is presided over by Prince Vladimir, a character not necessarily representing any historical figure,²⁸ before whom they have to prove their honor and their prowess. This is typically achieved by defeating an antagonist, who is usually an individual rather than a faction, representing the forces of evil – a foreign invader (as in the fights of Il'ia Muromets against Kalin Tsar), a dragon (Dobrynia Nikitich), a sorceress (Mikhailo Potyk), or other mythical creatures (Alesha Popovich). The *byliny* hero is, for the most part, strongly attached to the Kievan court, which bestows upon him the fame and social status required for a heroic figure. His moral qualities are essential, as is his sense of duty and loyalty to Prince Vladimir. Since he is a warrior, his military skills are strongly underlined; so is his Christian faith. His reliance on the intervention of God rather than on his comrades-in-arms conveys the impression of a highly individual hero rather than a leader.²⁹ He displays his military skills not only in the defense of the land, as is typical of most heroes, but also in the search for a bride. This search rarely has a happy ending, unlike the defense of the land, in which he is always successful: a knight-errant, victorious against all odds, always morally superior to his master.

All these common features allow us to envision a semiotic universe of the *byliny* which differentiates the *bylina* from other oral and/or epic forms, such as the historical songs or the military tales. The Kievan *byliny* thus define the canon of oral epic, whereas the *byliny* belonging to the mythological and Novgorod cycles would be at the periphery of such a canon; they share some characteristics with the Kievan *byliny* and others with various forms of oral compositions, such as folktales. The semiotic universe (the lonely hero, the court, the prince, the single antagonist) is structured around a feature which is dominant in the compositions: the hero's journey (Torres Prieto 2005). There is no such thing as a static *bylina* where the action takes place in one single location. There may be different types of travels – a military campaign, the search for a bride, or even an adventure trip – but there is no *bylina*, of any type, without them. What makes the Kievan *byliny* paradigmatic is that such journeys always begin or end in the Kievan court. This courtly element is an intrinsic part of the semiotic universe; its purpose is the reflection not of a historical situation but of a symbolic and stable reality that is recognizable by an audience as functionally effective. Each of the components of the *byliny* is so constructed as to permit the audience to recognize this specific type of composition (the travelling hero, the coward prince, the heathen antagonist).³⁰ Mikhailo Potyk, for example, clearly represents an antihero, but the *bylina* contains all the literary elements of the semiotic universe that allow us to define it as such, that is, the trip, the court, the prince, the antagonist.

Alongside the semiotic universe of the *byliny*, there are many other recurring details that form a more complex structure on two levels: the *realia* and the behavior of the characters. The *realia* include the means of transport (either horse or boat), ceremonies at court, banquets, the game of chess, archery contests, pilgrimages to Constantinople and the life of pilgrims, descriptions of palaces, churches, or tents in

the open field, tax-collection and tax-payment, and the occasional use of magic. All these “details” make clear to the audience that what they are listening to or reading is a *bylina*. Some of them can be traced in history, but not to the extent, as some have attempted, of dating the *byliny* within a specific historical context (Lipets 1969; Rybakov 1963). Likewise, the behavior of the characters, as described above, is constant in all the poems: they always convey, for example, a poor image of the Kievan prince. The elements of both these variables, the *realia* and the behavioral pattern of the characters involved in the plots, are stable, defining the *byliny* and distinguishing them from any other form of oral narrative in which a hero goes on a quest and is victorious.

From the compositional point of view, the proposition has been strongly defended that there was no “Urtext” underlying the *byliny* and that they were composed anew each time. Although reconstructing an “original text” is impossible, and indeed futile, the distribution and combination of episodes in the *bylina* are not as free as they are in the fairy tale or other forms of popular literature (laments, harvesting songs) which, furthermore, had a clear social function as songs accompanying social rituals.³¹ Nor are the motifs and themes as freely combined by the singer as they are in South Slavic epic (Vesterholt 1973).

The *bylina* is, in many respects, closer to medieval romance than to national epic. The hero fights to defend his personal honor, which sometimes coincides with national defense (though very often it does not), and when national defense is at stake, he is usually forced or requested to fight. Very often we find the heroes in the middle of trips that have a completely different aim, and they meet adventures as they go along, instead of having been predestined for them.

Origin and transmission of the byliny

From the time of their collection, studies on *byliny* have focused mainly on two questions: their origin and their transmission. These questions are pertinent to a study of the relation between *byliny* and history because, depending on the answers given to these questions, different, even contradictory, models of this relation have been produced by divergent schools of thought.

V. F. Miller and his followers, in what came to be known at the beginning of the twentieth century as the Historical School, argued that the origin of the *byliny* was aristocratic. They based this view mainly on certain details of *realia* and a process of “Kievization” of wandering epic motifs. These historical details are probably what allowed the reciters to say that the *byliny* were “staroe-byvaloe” (“old and real”). The fact that some of these details can be checked against historical information does not, however, make the *byliny* historiographic documents. We have evidence, for example, that from the mid-tenth century onwards the princes granted the privilege of collecting tribute to somebody else (Mel’nikova 1996: 67), which matches the occurrence of tax-collecting trips in the *byliny* in which the prince does not participate.³² We also find in the chronicles tales of single combat up to the mid-eleventh century,

which could have been an actual practice (Franklin and Shepard 1996: 195). Nevertheless, and although many details point to what Stender-Petersen (1956: 70–4; Stender-Petersen and Bach 1953: 217–40) and Mel'nikova (1996: 66–72, 96–112) call a “retinue culture,” whether of exclusively Varangian origin or of later, mixed Scando-Slavic provenance, actual connections are still difficult to prove – not because the historical arguments or theories are not consistent but because they overlook the literary element. It has often been claimed that the informants of the *byliny* and the chronicles were members of the prince's retinue forming the court, but such claims disregard the fact that the idealized heroic environment of the *byliny* might also have been projected onto this court. If the origin of the *byliny* was aristocratic and they were created at court, the process of transmission, probably by wandering minstrels, would have moved “downwards” until the texts were “adopted” by the community.

On the opposite side was the Soviet School of Folklorists, who insisted that the popular masses had mastered the creative process and that their texts offered evidence of opposition to the “feudal state.” In making this claim, however, these scholars were equating creation with preservation.

The above-mentioned semiotic universe, however, offers some clues as to the poems' relation to history, if the focus is changed from the possible producers to the potential addressees. We might then be able to infer an aristocratic origin of the *byliny* not only from certain historical details or from the use of certain motifs, such as hunting (Oinas 1985). Rather, it seems obvious that the *byliny* are closer to heroic romances than to grand national epics; the hero as the central figure embodies all the moral qualities to be highlighted. Accordingly, the poems' ethos must have resonated with a ruling class, commercial or military, whose ideas and ideals about loyalty to a master, defense of the land, and the importance of wealth were reflected in the poems. The hero's trust in God's intervention and the role that both the Mother of God and the saints play in his salvation are significant and comparable to later works of heroic literature; they suggest a Christianized society as potential recipients, sharing in the ethos of the *byliny* hero.³³

From the types of plots and heroes featured in the *byliny*, we might further infer that the society that was the intended audience of these poems was exposed to frequent war, worried about the integrity of the land, and was familiar with taxes and marriage arrangements with foreign peoples. The elite culture depicted in the poems, represented by the court and its ceremonials, the wealthy, long-distance trade, and the heroes' skills, not least in hunting and playing chess and musical instruments, suggests an audience that valued these skills and would view the lack of ceremony displayed, for example, by the envoys of Kalin Tsar upon entering the Kievan palace as reproachable behavior. The audience would also understand that the hero is aided by God or his saints and consider the equation of Motherland and Christian faith self-evident, as is the case in the written epics we discussed. Nor is the behavior of the prince unexpected. Unlike the princes whose lives are described in the chronicles, the prince of Kiev, as we have seen, is not an admirable character. By contrast, the heroes shine even more brightly. Like some mistreated military saints,

such as the brothers Boris and Gleb who were long worshipped as cult figures, the *byliny* heroes also endure their persecutions and set examples to follow.

Byliny as history

The historical context in which oral epic emerged and developed can thus be narrowed down. Based on the content of the poems, we can establish a historical *terminus post quem*. In the case of the *byliny*, this *terminus* comprises the following constellation: the pre-eminence of Kiev over other cities has clearly been established and not yet been diminished; the society is incontrovertibly Christian; and the Mongol conquest has already taken place. This is probably as close as we can get.

The fact that Kiev is constantly represented in the poems does not necessarily mean that they were composed in Kiev. In fact, as we saw, the description of the Kievan court and the Kievan prince is not at all favorable. The reference to Kiev is explained by the emblematic status of the city during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when it became a symbol in “the myth of common identity” (Franklin 1998: 188). The myth of the political legitimacy of the dynasty relied heavily on Kiev as a symbol, although the ruler of that court was not particularly favored. The poor image of the Kievan prince, rather than reflecting the people’s anti-feudal aspirations, as Soviet scholars proposed, could betray the internecine struggles of various branches of the emerging principalities – after all, the hero in the *byliny* is always non-Kievan – to acquire legitimacy by overcoming the mythic status of Kiev. This would clearly meet the quintessentially propagandistic aim of epic.

Present Myths

Epic vs. historiography

The problem of how to classify the texts available to us (both in original production and in translation) is connected with a complex controversy, mentioned above, about genre categorization. In the case of the Russian written epics, as well as of some of the translations made, for example, of the *Alexander Romance*, we find both a chronological or annalistic account of the events and a novelistic recreation of them. In a literary system such as the Slavic, where the central texts were either religious or historiographical (Lotman 1970–3; Yónova 2004), so that all others were dismissed as peripheral, the fact that certain works were considered “true” and “real” was enough for them to be incorporated into serious accounts (such as chronicles or liturgy), regardless of how they might fit into modern genre classifications.³⁴ If literary *accounts*, with a more or less epic or heroic character, were inserted into historiographical works narrating the history of the world from its creation, it is because they were perceived as functionally equivalent to history and therefore not subject to change – probably due to the prevailing principle of *imitatio auctoritatis*.

the integrity of the text was still preserved, regardless of linguistic adaptations (like those made in Rus').

By contrast, epic as a *narrative form* was at the periphery of such a system and therefore adaptable to the perceived needs of the readers or listeners. Even if the content of some prose descriptions of princes inserted in Russian chronicles might remind us of epic, this does not mean that they were perceived as peripheral in the same way that epic was. These chronicle accounts were, therefore, governed by the same compositional rules as those that applied to the chronicles in which they were inserted, namely, imitation and re-creation.³⁵ This is most likely the reason why we find doublets of the same plots in Rus', one historiographic and another epic, and why the *peripheral* versions, i.e. the epic ones, in fact show little respect for historical facts. In the case of South Slavic epic, for example, where chronicle writing did not serve the interests of a ruling dynasty, the boundaries between central and peripheral genres were much more blurred. This could be one of the reasons that would explain the strong historical sense of Christian epic in the Balkans (Lord 1972).

Related to the latter, there is also an enduring controversy over dating the texts, and not only in the case of oral compositions, for which the only secure date is that of collection. The complication is clear in dealing with written epic because there are three different dates: the manuscript date, that can be reasonably attested by watermarks and other codicological and palaeographic means; the copying date, that sometimes is also attested in a colophon or by some indirect textological evidence; and then the purported time of composition, which sometimes can (but very often cannot) be confirmed by linguistic means. If it is accepted that copies were made in *scriptoria* where historiographic material was available to the same copyists who copied, or even maybe composed, the epic texts, would they choose not to check the historical account of the same facts that were being narrated in literary form? Iaroslav of Galich, for example, mentioned in the *Igor Tale*, was in fact ruling when the expedition of Igor took place in 1185, and Trnovo was still Christian when the battle narrated in the *Zadonshchina* took place, but choosing to use these data as means for internal dating of the epic texts carries some implications about authorship as well. It implies that epic was first created orally and then written down, and that those dates correspond to a real witness who lived at the time of composition; it implies that the copyist would not have added these chronological references to enhance the narrative's credibility; and it implies that the composer of the epic was unaware of the existence of chronicles telling these same facts. In short, it implies that epic was not only peripheral, but almost on the verge of literacy. And whereas this could be said of the circumstances where oral epics were collected in the nineteenth century, it seems far-fetched for the composition of written epics in Early Rus', particularly now that literary and linguistic analysis has opened many new avenues of research. Paradoxically, if the division between central and peripheral genres is accepted as a truism, it implies giving more credibility to the historical knowledge of a wandering minstrel, or a series of them, than to a conscientious copyist.

It has already been pointed out how a rigorous linguistic analysis is the surest path to putting an end to decades of controversy, and the analysis of written epics in

comparison with other literary forms (hagiography, translations, panegyrics) has also proven extremely fruitful. In particular, the relevance of hagiography in the development of epic genres in the East and also South Slavic areas can hardly be overstated. This is not surprising, since ruling dynasties were making substantial efforts to assert their political and religious independence from Byzantium. In both cases, the development of epic or heroic poetry as a genre was encouraged by a prominent ruling dynasty – the Nemanjas in Serbia and the Riurikovichi in Rus' – a great part of whose members were sooner or later anointed as saints, and who were involved in constant military campaigns against foreign invaders or to establish the authority of one dynastic branch over others.

Epic is intrinsically propagandistic,³⁶ and the common aspects found in the creation of heroic figures in both traditions might well reflect the expectations of the audiences for whom the poems, in both written and oral form, were composed. The sanctity of the ruler, mirroring the holiness of the land, was clearly an indispensable factor. The combination of the defense of religion and the defense of the Motherland became, therefore, as has been pointed out, a regular feature in written as well as oral production.

Conclusion

Despite the differences we have seen in the various ways of creating, translating, composing, recreating, and recomposing epic tales in Slavic languages, two factors are pervasive: epic is not history and epic needs to have a social function to subsist.

The first point seems to have been much clearer to the primary composers or translators of medieval epic poems, who seem to have been able to draw clear lines between historiographical accounts (central) and epic ones (peripheral), than to nineteenth-century romantic nationalists, whether they were Slavophiles or not. At the core of the arguments on the authenticity of the *Igor Tale*, for example, or of the purported existence of Serbian epics at the court of the Nemanjas, is the antiquarian concept that the justification of the *raison d'être* of modern states lies with epic. More than two centuries after James Macpherson's sham we are still trying to find relevant data to retrieve *our* idea of nation from the epics of the Middle Ages.³⁷

Regardless of the fact that their value as historiographical evidence is minimal – even if authentic, the content of none of the epic poems would tell us anything we do not already know from other sources about the Slavic Middle Ages, and it would only slightly modify our assumptions about the development of epic – they are still being understood as quintessential reflections of what has come to be known as “national soul.” And it works. Like the statues of medieval heroes and princes scattered in cities and villages across Europe, epics give evidence of the role the past plays for the identity of modern societies, similar to that which they played at the time of their creation.

If at the time of their composition or translation they served the political claims of the ruling dynasties, they have also contributed to the creation of modern national

myths. Particularly in the case of oral epics, it did not matter much to the composers of bygone times whether the poems were historically accurate – after all, that was not the reason for which they were being composed. Neither has it mattered much to modern ideologists that modern positivist disciplines, such as archaeology, history, and linguistics, have long been struggling to provide us with a broader, clearer, and more accurate picture of the Slavic Middle Ages.

A dispassionate and detailed study of the received tradition, as it is presently attested, should take us to a new point of departure, where past tales were no longer at the service of present myths.

Notes

- * This chapter has been written with the help of a post-doctoral fellowship funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education. I would like to thank Pierre Gonneau (Université de Paris-Sorbonne) for his attentive reading of the first draft and wise comments. I would also like to thank Daniel Collins for his much-needed observations, as well as the editors of the present volume, Kurt A. Raaflaub and David Konstan, for their valuable suggestions.
- 1 For a clear and up-to-date introduction to Slavic, see Schenker 1995. On the Slavs' history, see Conte 1986.
- 2 The traditional labels for these two traditions are also a contentious issue. South Slavic or Balkan are sometimes preferred to Serbian or Serbo-Croatian, if they include both the Bulgarian and the Macedonian traditions. Likewise, it is a contentious issue whether the literature composed in Kievan Rus', or Old Rus', should be labeled as Russian, or Russian. The difficulty depends on whether one wants to refer to the time of their purported composition, the time and language in which they were collected, or the current geopolitical situation. For the purposes of the present chapter, we will refer to South and East Slavic.
- 3 The most up-to-date and comprehensive reference work on medieval Russia, with ample bibliography on a wide range of aspects, is currently Perrie 2006.
- 4 This area of cultural exchange, denominated *Slavia Romana*, included the Czechs and the Poles, who adopted Christianity in the Western rite in 863 and 966, respectively. It also included part of the South Slavic lands.
- 5 The lament, a strictly feminine form of lyric, is common to some Slavic languages (*tuzhbalice* in Serbian and *tbzhachki* in Bulgarian), and long narrative laments are intimately connected with heroic epics (mentioned below in the case of Jaroslavnas's lament in the *Igor Tale*). Famous in Serbian medieval literature are the laments of Jefimija (Jelena Mrnjavčević) over the deaths of her infant son and Prince Lazar, her protector since the death of her husband, the despot Ugljesa Mrnjavcevic, in 1371 in the Battle of Marica (Matejić and Milivojević 1978: 94–9).
- 6 *Slavia Orthodoxa* is a convenient term used to designate those areas where the use of the Cyrillic alphabet was predominant, usually linked as well to Orthodoxy after the schism (1054). The difference became more drastic after the sack of Constantinople by the crusaders during the Fourth Crusade in 1204.
- 7 Most important were the *Chronicle* of John Malalas and the *Chronicle* of George Hamartolus.

- 8 For further details on translations of other heroic and epic works into Slavonic, see Torres Prieto 2009.
- 9 The process of adaptation also varied from one area to another. See *ibid.* for further details.
- 10 On general difficulties of generic classification in medieval Rus' literature, see Birnbaum 1985; Ingham 1987a, 1987b; Lenhoff 1982, 1984, 1987, 1989, and Seemann 1987. For the specific case of military tales, see Stokes 1979. For a wider discussion on generic classification in medieval literature, see Jauss 1982.
- 11 The text has been masterfully edited recently by Zalizniak (2004: 336–50), based on the division into chapters or verses made by Jakobson (1966: 133–50). The number of translations available in English is meager in comparison to the works dedicated to it: e.g., Nabokov's highly lyrical version (1961) and Zenkovsky's, included in his anthology (1974: 167–92).
- 12 Most recently by Edward Keenan (2003) whose work has prompted a wide range of reactions; see Butler 2006; Franklin 2005; Strakhov 2004.
- 13 Hypatian (PSRL T. 2: cols. 628–51) and Laurentian (PSRL T.1: cols. 394–400).
- 14 Namely, two historical writings (a universal chronograph and some Russian annals), as well as translations of the *Tale of Opulent India* (The Letter of Prester John), the *Romance of Akir the Wise*, and a copy of a Russian version of the Byzantine romance of *Digenis Akritas*, the *Devgenievo Dejanie*.
- 15 An extraordinarily detailed study of both texts and their points of contact can be found in Zimin 2006.
- 16 Linguistic analysis validating the *Igor Tale*'s authenticity has been advanced by Strakhov (2003) and further developed by Zalizniak (2004).
- 17 Jakobson's edition divides the text in 218 chapters or verses (1966: 133–50; we refer here to verses as "v.").
- 18 The edition of all the extant texts was made by Dmitrieva (1966), and English translations are available in Jakobson and Worth (1966); Zenkovsky (1974: 211–24).
- 19 One of the three manuscripts of the longer version (Synodal), and the only manuscript of the short version (Kirillo-Belozersky).
- 20 Those who accept an earlier date for the composition of the *Zadonschchina* would date the *Tale of the Battle* to 1408–15, although watermark analysis of all the extant manuscripts places the earliest ones at the beginning of the sixteenth century.
- 21 This cycle would comprise various works, such as the *Narration of the Destruction of Riazan' by Batu* or the *Tale of Icon on Nikola Chudotvortsa*; all are included in the First Novgorod Chronicle.
- 22 This fact should perhaps prompt us to reconsider the compositional process of oral epics rather than the generic definition of epic in Rus'.
- 23 On Aleksander Nevsky, see Isoaho 2006. On the text of his *vita*, see Ostrowski 2007; 2008.
- 24 Since South Slavic oral epics are dealt with elsewhere in this volume (see Foley's chapter), I shall focus on Russian oral epics.
- 25 The term *bylina* was introduced in 1839 by I. P. Sakharov in his work *Songs of the Russian Nation*, taken from the opening lines of the *Tale of Igor's Campaign*.
- 26 The best collection of *byliny* (introduction and translation) in English is Bailey and Ivanova 1998.
- 27 On the atypicality of the heroes of the mythological cycle, see Mendoza Tuñón and Torres Prieto 2009.

- 28 Two possible historical figures have been proposed, though: Vladimir I Sviatoslavich (who ruled c. 978–1015) and Vladimir Vsevolodovich Monomakh (who ruled between 1113 and 1125).
- 29 The mother of the hero plays a prominent role in the *byliny*, sometimes replaced by another female figure in the family, such as an aunt or a sister.
- 30 What Jauss (1982) called *Rezeptionästhetik*, which is intimately linked to a phrase he coined: “horizon of expectations.”
- 31 If we analyze other oral compositions, such as Russian lyric songs, wedding songs, or funeral laments, we will see that they have the same meter and motifs, but not a common plot.
- 32 We should not overlook, however, that some *byliny* describe trips in which the Kievan prince sends a *bogatyr* to pay tribute to Kalin Tsar and not to collect it from him, a practice that presumes at least the arrival of the Mongols in 1223. On tax paying by Rus’ princes to the Golden Horde, see Martin 2006.
- 33 The use of magic does not make the *byliny* pagan, as some Soviet scholars contended; it only makes them more fantastic. On the reflection of the process of Christianization in the *byliny*, see Torres Prieto 2004.
- 34 An in-depth, masterful discussion of problems of genre classification, in regard to hagiography, is Lenhoff 1989.
- 35 A parallel situation with respect to the panegyrics of deceased princes is discussed by Tolochko 1999.
- 36 For studies on the propagandistic dimension of epic, see, among many others, Dumézil 1995; García Gual 1983; Innes 2000; Jiménez Garnica 1995; Meletinskii 1998; Powell 1992; Schneidmüller 2002.
- 37 James Macpherson published in 1761 an epic poem he had purportedly discovered, under the title of *Fingal, an Ancient Epic Poem in Six Books, together with Several Other Poems composed by Ossian, the Son of Fingal, translated from the Gaelic Language*. In fact, he had copied, pasted, and edited traditional ballads of historical content to create a long epic poem, which, nevertheless, under the predominant spirit of Romanticism, greatly contributed to the collection and edition of traditional Scottish and Irish folklore. The Finnish *Kalevala* was made by the same technique, although never purporting to be a lost manuscript.

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Historicity and Anachronism in *Beowulf*

GEOFFREY RUSSOM

Beowulf opens in prehistoric Germania, which includes Denmark, the Frisian Netherlands, and the northwest corner of Germany (Mallory 1989: 87). The narrative traverses much of this ancestral domain and takes us just beyond it into Sweden. Such geographic scope qualifies as epic in a familiar sense of the term. With more than 3,000 lines, *Beowulf* also qualifies as epic in length. It is the only long poem with secular heroic content that survives to us in traditional Germanic verse form. Though written in Old English, the poem never mentions England. Its author clearly worships Jehovah rather than Germanic gods, but *Beowulf* is not markedly Christian. Its overt religious matter comes entirely from the Old Testament, with no mention of Jesus or the Christian Church.

The plot of *Beowulf* is constructed around confrontations with monsters. Narrative action begins with repeated attacks by Grendel, a giant, on the great hall of Hrothgar, King of the Danes. Word of these attacks reaches Beowulf, nephew of Hygelac, King of the Geats in South Sweden. Reciprocating Hrothgar's earlier assistance to his father, Beowulf sails to Denmark with his retinue. There he inflicts fatal injuries on Grendel in hand-to-hand combat. When Grendel's mother attacks the hall, killing one of Hrothgar's retainers to avenge her son, Beowulf follows her to her underwater lair and dispatches her as well. Hrothgar and Wealhtheow, Queen of Denmark, reward Beowulf magnificently for these accomplishments. He returns home to the land of the Geats, where he eventually becomes king and rules well for 50 years. Then a dragon attacks the ancestral estate of his family, and the old hero, still vigorous, resolves to slay this monster single-handed. The dragon-fire is too much for him, however, and his heroic kinsman Wiglaf must come to his aid from the sidelines. Together they kill the dragon, but Beowulf dies from its poisoned bite. The poem concludes with his funeral.

Although fantastic adventures take center stage in *Beowulf*, linking scenes provide detailed representation of life in a heroic hall, and a number of subplots deal with

ancient Germanic politics. Several kings known to Scandinavian history make an appearance (Klaeber 1950: xxix–xlvi). The poem also mentions a little-known historical event: an unsuccessful Geatish raid on France led by Hygelac. Frankish annals date this inglorious skirmish to the early sixth century CE (Fulk and Cain 2003: 199). *Beowulf* appeared about two centuries later, to judge from linguistic and metrical indicators (Fulk 1992: 390). The author would hardly have learned about anything as trivial as Hygelac's raid from written history available in England. Oral narrative tradition evidently brought details of the event from Scandinavia and preserved them for a significant length of time. Such a tradition might well preserve information about pre-Christian culture, about the way people thought and felt in Germania before it was integrated into systems of centralized power inherited from Rome.¹

Insight into Germania comes primarily from Germanic cultures of the historical period transformed to varying degrees by contact with Greco-Roman urbanity and the Christian mission. Nothing from these cultures is guaranteed to be authentically Germanic. As with the prehistoric language of Germania, Germanic culture is reconstructed by comparative analysis of surviving documents. Good candidates for ancient Germanic status are concepts with no obvious Greek or Roman source that are attested in two or more Germanic languages. Poetic texts in Old English, Old Norse, Old Saxon, and Old High German provide especially valuable material for reconstruction, since they encode important ideas in formulas inherited from a common heroic tradition. Germanic belongs to the Indo-European family of languages, so Germania must have inherited Indo-European cultural concepts along with concepts from the non-Indo-European cultures that originally occupied north-west Europe. Good candidates for Indo-European status in *Beowulf* are concepts expressed by related words in ancient Greek and Indic poetry.

In this essay, I begin with literary criticism of *Beowulf*, focusing on a remarkably influential interpretation by Tolkien (1936). Next I review arguments by Watkins (1995) that the poem's ideology preserves important concepts of Indo-European heroic culture. To supplement Watkins's account, I illustrate traditional formulaic language in four Germanic verse traditions. Having summarized the case for *Beowulf* as culturally archaic, I turn to rival accounts representing the poet as an imaginative antiquarian with an English Christian perspective. Here I explain why some current skepticism about the poem's Germania seems to me more doubtful than Watkins's reconstruction. Finally, I isolate modernizing trends in *Beowulf* with a simple hypothesis: that the poet situated a Germanic hero-tale within the heroic era of biblical history. Since every aspect of Germania is vigorously debated, I cannot do justice to all points of view in a chapter-length presentation; and I will not argue that my reading of any particular passage is the only plausible one. Instead I will construct a straightforward, internally consistent theory of the poem's archaic content that is also consistent with the relevant textual detail.

Old English meter is much like Old Saxon, Old High German, and Old Norse meters. The alliterative verse tradition predates the splitting of ancient Germanic into languages of the historical period and was inherited independently by each

linguistic subgroup (Lehmann 1956: 6–8). Modern interpretation of *Beowulf* begins with analysis of cultural concepts that have parallels in cognate Germanic traditions. In an important early article, Phillpotts (1928) compares the *Beowulf* poet's concept of providence with a pre-Christian concept of fate that survives in Old Norse literature. According to the Norse mythological poem *Völuspá*, supernatural women called norns assign a fate to each human being, and the first norn is named *Urð*.² At line 1056 of *Beowulf*, we learn that Jehovah can overrule *wyrd*, an Old English cognate of *Urð* that translates plausibly as “fate” in this case. The abstract sense “fate” seems inadequate, however, for passages like “Wyrd oft nereð / unfægne eorl, þonne his ellen dēah” (“*Wyrd* often saves the undoomed hero when his courage holds true”) (*Beowulf* 572b–3b).³ From a Classical or Christian perspective, fate can hardly be conceived as a savior, and the idea of fate saving someone not fated to die seems bizarrely tautological. Here the author must allude to some power that imposes an outer limit on each human life but also saves courageous individuals from untimely death. The norn plays this kind of dual role (Pulsiano and Wolf 1993: 625–6). Such allusions seem to have poetic rather than religious force in *Beowulf*, like allusions to Classical gods in later English poetry.

Tolkien (1936) synthesized studies of early English and Norse cultures in an interpretive essay of great rhetorical power.⁴ Continuing influence of this essay is shown by Drout (2002), an edition of a larger draft not previously published. Tolkien emphasizes that the Norse *Æsir* gods, though long-lived, are confined “within Time” (268). The *Æsir* are heroic role models who must suffer death beside human heroes at Ragnarök (the Doom of the Gods) in a last great battle with monsters. At Ragnarök, Odin, whose English name Woden survives in *Wednesday*, will be swallowed by the giant wolf Fenrir (*Völuspá*, stanza 53). Thor, the god of Thursday, will kill the Midgard Serpent, but will die a few moments later from its venom (stanza 56). Contrary to appearances, the wolf and the serpent are brothers, children of Loki, the evil companion of Odin, and Angrboða, a female giant.⁵ Tolkien interprets these monsters as “foes of man's precarious fortress” (274), creatures of terrible power that dramatize the fragility of human social life. Opposition to such creatures may end in death, but that death, faced bravely, is glorious rather than humiliating. “It is the strength of the northern mythological imagination,” Tolkien says, that it “put the monsters in the centre, gave them victory but no honour” (268).

Given divine role models who had to face death, the best a human hero could hope for was “to earn *dom* [glory] and *lof* [praise] among men and posterity” (270). “It is better,” says Beowulf, “to avenge a friend than to mourn very much. Each of us must come to the end of life in the world. Let anyone who can do so win glory before death. That will be best for a warrior when he no longer lives.”⁶ Here Beowulf links undying glory to a duty of vengeance, the prevailing hope of security in ancient Germanic cultures, when friendship networks were like small nations responsible for their own defense and feud was equivalent to warfare (Pulsiano and Wolf 1993: 115–17). Norse mythological history establishes the same relation between glory and feud, representing the Doom of the Gods as the heroic climax of a long feud with the giants. Gods and giants are represented as hostile kindreds rather than as

different species, and these kindreds are sometimes linked by blood ties. Odin's mother Bestla is a giant (*Gylfaginning*, 6; Young 1966: 34). Njörðr, the fisherman's god, is husband of the female giant Skaði, an expert hunter (*Gylfaginning*, 23; Young 1966: 51–2). The humanoid social groups in Snorri's myths look like small tribes that raid and intermarry across the cosmic borderlands. As a genre closely linked to epic, Norse myth contributes a rich body of evidence to the study of heroic culture (Bessason 1977).

Tolkien's estimate of the monsters' importance receives strong support from Watkins (1995), who extends comparative linguistics into a comparative poetics.⁷ According to Watkins, the dragon fight and the concept of undying glory are inherited from Indo-European culture.⁸ In some cases, Indo-European origin is shown by traditional phrases that survive in two or more of the daughter languages. The best-documented case (chapter 15) involves formulaic cognates of Homeric Greek *klé(w)os áphthiton*, "fame imperishable," a phrase used by Achilles to explain his heroic destiny (*Iliad* 9.413–16). This phrase is cognate with Sanskrit *śrávas ákṣitam* in the heroic mythology of the *Rigveda*. The age and traditional status of the Greek phrase is highlighted by its employment as a woman's name in prehistoric Linear B (Watkins 1995: 174). Greek *klé(w)os* and Sanskrit *śrávas* are derivatives of a verb meaning "hear" that have come to mean "what one hears in heroic poetry." Cognates with similar force are Latin *laus*, borrowed into English as *laud*; and *clú*, the word for fame in Old Irish heroic literature (Thurneysen 1946: 216). To the cognates discussed by Watkins we can add Germanic forms like Old Norse *hljóð*, "hearing," used by the narrator of *Völuspá* to request a hearing for her poem (stanza 1); and Old English *hlisa*, "fame," from the same root as Modern English *listen*.

When the giant Grendel is defeated, Hrothgar's court poet immortalizes the occasion (867b–915b), interweaving praise of Beowulf with the story of Sigmund, a prototypical hero who has earned *dōm unlýtēl*, "no little glory" (885b). The constituent *sig-* in *Sigmund* means "victory." Its Greek cognate *hek-* appears in *Hector*, the name of a hero in the *Iliad* (Watkins 1995: 414 n. 2). In the Old Norse variant of Sigmund's story, the dragon-slaying attributed to him by the *Beowulf* poet (884b–997b) is attributed instead to Sigmund's son Sigurd. This heroic deed is represented in Eddic poems, which give the dragon's name as *Fáfnir*, and also in pre-Christian carved drawings (Davidson 1969: 107–8). Sigurd's traditional epithet *Fáfnishani*, "killer of Fafnir," has a constituent *-bani*, "killer," that is cognate with Old English *bana*, Modern English "bane." Watkins reconstructs an Indo-European formula "KILL SERPENT" from traditional phrases in several daughter languages. The verb of this formula is a cognate of *bani* and *bana* (1995: 423). Norse *bani* also appears in epithets of Thor like *orms einbani*, "sole-killer of the serpent" (419).

According to Watkins, the slaying of a monster is the most important theme that survives to us from Indo-European poetry. In early narratives of this type, the hero is a defender of society and the monster represents chaos (1995: 299). Watkins defines an important literary function of chaos monsters as "the figuration of all that is 'anti-social'" (300), and this definition applies perfectly to the giants and dragons of *Beowulf*. Grendel has epithets like *ān-genga*, "lone-walker" (165a, 449a) and

fēond mancynnes, “enemy of mankind” (164b, 1276a). The dragon killed by Beowulf (2538a–2711a) comes forth only to ravage his Swedish neighbors, then flies back to the wasteland retreat where he hoards his treasure (2278a–2320b). The greed of Germanic dragons seems particularly anti-social in a heroic context. As Watkins observes, “the dragon keeps wealth from circulating: the ultimate evil in [a] society in which gift-exchange and the lavish bestowal of riches institutionalized precisely that circulation” (1995: 300). Beowulf, a dragon-killer and a giant-killer, the strongest warrior of his time (196–7), the largest man his contemporaries have ever seen (247b–9a), bears a striking resemblance to Herakles, “the prototypical Greek hero” (Watkins 1995: 374).

When a Germanic dragon is killed, its hoarded wealth passes to the slayer, who can take pride in restoring this wealth to circulation. As Beowulf lies dying from the dragon’s venom, he comforts himself with the thought of leaving great treasure to his people (2794–8). Giants are represented as destructive rather than avaricious, so the giant-killer’s reward comes from representatives of the injured social group. Beowulf asks Hrothgar explicitly for permission to kill Grendel (426–32), and there is an important parallel encounter with Queen Wealhtheow (625–41), who provides her own exhortations, treasures, and words of advice to young warriors (Russom 1988: 181–2). When Beowulf proves victorious, Wealhtheow gives him great gifts, including a neck-ring of legendary value (1192–1231). These gifts are comparable to Hrothgar’s (1020–49). Wealhtheow’s daughter Freawaru prepares for the same kind of authority, earning the allegiance of heroes with her own gift-giving (2020a–29a), like the well-advised son of a king (20a–24a). When reporting on Danish affairs to his uncle Hygelac, Beowulf represents this female power as glorious (2016b–19b). The poem seems to reflect a bilateral kinship structure, possibly non-Indo-European, that determined prestige through ties to important women as well as important men (Murray 1983). Germanic queens who were not warriors could receive undying glory from poets. In *Widsith*, a catalogue of legendary kings, the narrator mentions a splendid neck-ring he received from Eormenric the Goth that was matched by a comparable ring from Eormenric’s queen Ealhild (88–98). The poet then describes his response to Ealhild’s generosity (99–103):

Hyre lof lengde geond londa fela,
þonne ic be songe secgan sceolde
hwær ic under swegle sēlast wisse
goldhrodene cwēn giefē bryttian.

Her fame was perpetuated throughout many lands
when I had to say in song where under heaven
I knew that the best gold-adorned queen gave gifts.

In this society, fame goes not only to warrior heroes but also to leaders of both sexes whose generosity and diplomatic skills create friendship networks worth defending.

Greek and Rigvedic meters show signs of descent from the same ancestral meter (Nagy 1974), but they have diverged significantly, as with the corresponding

languages. Alliterative meters are more obviously related and cognate Germanic formulas are easier to reconstruct. There is striking evidence of pre-Christian origin even for higher-level features of poetic structure. Here I focus on two clear cases: formulaic treatment of cosmic origins and a formulaic opening for monster-slaying narratives.⁹

In narrating *frumsceft*, “the first creation,” Old English poets often refer to the universe as earth and heaven. The following examples illustrate formulaic expression of this essential idea in the cognate alliterative traditions:

iorð fannz æva né upphiminn	<i>Völuspá</i> , stanza 3
[earth was-made not-yet nor up-heaven]	(Old Norse)
Dat ero ni uuas noh ūfhimil	<i>Wessobrunner Gebet</i> , 2
[that earth was not, nor up-heaven]	(Old High German)
erðe endi ūphimil	<i>Helianð</i> , 2886a
[earth and up-heaven]	(Old Saxon)
eorðan eallgrēne ond ūpheofon	<i>Andreas</i> 798
[earth all-green and up-heaven]	(Old English)

The Germanic line consists of two verses linked by alliteration on the first syllable of each verse bearing metrically significant stress. Two alliterations may occur in the first verse of the line, but only one in the second verse. Stressed syllables usually alliterate if they begin with the same consonant, though initial *sp-*, *st-* and *sk-* must alliterate as clusters. If no consonant precedes the vowel of a stressed syllable, the empty syllabic onset counts as a “zero consonant” (Russom 1998: 64). Any stressed syllable beginning with a vowel alliterates with any other such syllable. Thus the cognate words for “earth” in the examples above alliterate with the words for “up.” Compounds like Old English *ūpheofon* appear frequently in verse but seldom or never in prose. The first constituent exists primarily for metrical purposes and often adds nothing to the literal denotation of the compound (Russom 1998: ch. 7). A present-day analog to the “earth / up-heaven” formula is the rhyme-formula “love / heaven above” in popular songs, where semantically redundant “above” provides the rhyme. The redundant constituents most heavily exploited in *Beowulf* are words meaning “war” or “warlike” (Klaeber 1950: lxiv), concepts seldom out of place in heroic epic. We find, for example, 30 total instances of *gūð-*, “battle,” 25 of *hild(e)-*, “war,” and 24 of *wel-*, “slaughter, the slain.” Old Norse cognates of such constituents appear in similar poetic compounds (Russom 1987: 569).

Jehovah’s creation of the universe provides the context for the Old English, Old Saxon, and Old High German variants of the “earth / up-heaven” formula. The context for the Old Norse variant is creation of middle-earth by Germanic gods. Association between the formula and first creation comes into even sharper focus when we consider the remaining Old English lines in which *eorðe* alliterates with *ūpheofon* or with *ūprodor*, “up-sky.” Only one of these lines makes general reference to the cosmos (*Exodus* 430). In five, the context is first creation (*Elene* 730, *Exodus* 26, *Genesis* 99, *Seafarer* 105, *Paris Psalter* 101.22,2). In *Christ* 1128, earth and up-heaven

express outrage at the crucifixion of Jesus, referred to somewhat anachronistically as their creator (1131a). One example occurs in the context of Doomsday, creation's binary opposite (*Christ* 968), and one in a description of cosmic turmoil that accompanies Moses' parting of the Red Sea (*Exodus* 76). A final example comes from *Metrical Charms I*, the first in a collection of texts combining Christian prayer with Germanic incantation. Here the speaker petitions a mixed group of powers for fruitful land (28–30):

bidde ic ðone hāligan heofonrīces weard,
eorðan ic bidde and ūpheofon
and ðā sōþan sancta Marian.

I pray the holy guardian of heaven-kingdom,
earth I pray, and up-heaven
and the true holy Mary.

In line 68 of the same charm, as North observes (1997: 250–1), the poet may address an earth goddess worshiped in Germania: “Hāl wes þū, folde, fīra mōdor” (“Be healthy, Earth, mother of men”). This goddess was called Nerthus by some early Germanic tribes according to Tacitus, who equates her with Mother Earth (R. Robinson 1935: ch. 40). Representation of Christian topics in Old English poems could obviously incorporate pre-Christian culture to varying degrees. Alliteration of *iorð* with *upphiminn* occurs in two additional Norse Eddic examples. One comes from a mythological poem like *Völuspá* in which Odin quizzes a giant about first creation. In the other example, earth and up-heaven quake when Sigurd gazes on the hall of the warrior woman Brynhild, his future lover.¹⁰

Beowulf employs formulaic language of special importance to set the plot in motion. At line 98, in the prefatory section, Hrothgar, King of the Danes, has been celebrating the completion of a huge royal hall, a hall so literally splendid that its light shines over many lands from the height on which it stands (309–11). As a generous lord, the binary opposite of a greedy dragon, Hrothgar enjoys himself by giving away all his personal treasures (67b–81a). Transition from this happy initial state to the narrative action begins at lines 99–101 with Grendel's attack:

Swā ðā drihtguman drēamum lifdon,
ēadiglice, oð ðæt ān ongan
fýrene fremman fēond on helle.

So the men of the hall lived in joy,
blessedly, until one began
to perform evil deeds, a fiend in hell.

Much later in the poem, Beowulf achieves peace and prosperity as king of the Geats in south Sweden. The author pauses to summarize this era, then returns to the narrative action at lines 2208b–11b:

Hē gehēold tela
 fiftig wintra – wæs ðā frōd cyning,
 cald ēpelweard –, oð ðæt ān ongan
 deorcum nihtum draca rīcsian.

He governed well
 for fifty winters – he was then a wise king,
 an old guardian of the land –, until one began
 during the dark nights, a dragon, to prevail.

In both passages, the transition is effected by “oð ðæt ān ongan,” a verse that employs *ān*, “one” as grammatical subject, with explicit identification following in an appositive phrase. Use of such appositive phrases, called “variations,” is markedly poetic, occurring with great frequency in *Beowulf* but rarely in Old English prose (F. C. Robinson 1979). What we have here is a formulaic opening scene.

At the beginning of time, according to *Völuspá*, the Æsir gods construct a splendid hall where they enjoy the good life (stanza 8):

Teflðo í túni, teitir vóro,
 var þeim vættergis vant ór gulli,
 unz þriár qvómo þursa meyar,
 ámátcar mioc, ór iotunheimom.

They played chess in the fort and were happy
 – there was by no means a lack of gold for them
 – until three came, gigantic maidens,
 very unpleasant, from the lands of the giants.

Here too the transition from a happy initial state is effected by a verse beginning with “until” in which the grammatical subject is a numerical pronoun and explicit identification is provided by an appositive phrase.¹¹ *Beowulf*’s formulaic opening scene seems to have an ancient Germanic origin. The attacking maidens of *Völuspá* are described with cognates of two words that refer to Grendel in *Beowulf*: *þyrs* and *eoten*, both usually translated as “giant.” These cognate monsters appear to have cognate abodes. The Old Norse lands of the giants are adjacent to the land of the dead, ruled by Hel, a female giant (Russom 2007: 232). In *Beowulf*, Grendel, the fiend from hell (101b), lives in a land of fire ruled by a female giant, his mother (1497–1500). *Beowulf* introduces Grendel as a “foe of man’s precarious fortress,” to borrow Tolkien’s phrase, and the cognate scene of *Völuspá* places giants in exactly the same relation to the fortress of the gods.

Watkins (1995) treats *Beowulf* as a culturally archaic text, setting it beside the *Iliad* and the *Rigveda* for reconstructive purposes, but some Old English specialists view the poem as relatively late. If it dates from the end of the Old English period, as Kiernan (1981) argues, its comparative value would be less obvious. In a survey of recent work, Liuzza (1995: 281) observes that “times have changed” since the days

of Tolkien, when *Beowulf* was attributed with confidence to the early eighth century. Liuzza concedes that poetic formulas can be validated as ancient (287), but rejects metrical and linguistic criteria long used for dating Old English poems. Liuzza surveys a number of dating hypotheses at odds with the old consensus, notably those in Chase (1981), but he represents these as possible alternatives and does not claim to rule out an early date. For Liuzza, how a researcher situates the poem historically is to some extent a matter of taste: “A late *Beowulf*,” he says, “is a text in some ways more interesting to the contemporary reader than a pre-Viking Age poem, because it is more involved in irony, politics, and the self-conscious ambiguities of literary perspective” (285).

Attacks on traditional dating in Chase (1981) are critiqued in Fulk (1992). After systematic review of linguistic and metrical criteria, Fulk presents a variety of evidence for an early *Beowulf*. According to Fulk, if the original was in Mercian Old English, as seems most probable, it was composed earlier than 725, little more than a hundred years after Pope Gregory’s mission to the heathen Anglo-Saxons in 597. Fulk thinks the poem might have been composed very early indeed but probably no earlier than 685 (1992: 390). Proponents of a late date remain fairly numerous, however, and some distinguished researchers view the poem as an antiquarian project ironically distanced from Germanica.

Although Tolkien was a brilliant practitioner of Germanic studies, his defense of *Beowulf* as literature started a critical trend that proved hostile to comparative analysis. Tolkien argued against widespread suspicion that biblical content in the poem might be inessential, an entertainer’s cynical bow to the new religious power or a later addition by an interfering monk. Tolkien also parted company with German scholars who used the poem as “a manual of Germanic antiquities” (1936: 248). Perhaps the most influential sentence in Tolkien’s essay is this: “The illusion of historical truth and perspective, that has made *Beowulf* seem such an attractive quarry, is largely a product of art” (247).

Tolkien thought that Christian conversion would have worked an immediate change in the old belief system:

One does not have to wait until all the native traditions of the older world have been replaced or forgotten; for the minds which still retain them are changed, and the memories viewed in a different perspective: *at once they become more ancient and remote, and in a sense darker*. It is through such a blending that there was available to a poet who set out to *write* a poem – and in the case of *Beowulf* we may probably use this very word – on a scale and plan unlike a minstrel’s lay, both new faith and new learning (or education), and also a body of native tradition (itself requiring to be learned) for the changed mind to contemplate together (263).

On this view, the world of the poem is a distinctly English Germanica constructed by an author of great originality.

Tolkien rejected unflattering comparisons of Old English poetry with Homeric epic, suggesting that *Beowulf* “may turn out to be no epic at all” (254). Such insistence

on criticism of the poem *sui generis* was congenial to structuralism, which had turned away from comparative methodology at this time, focusing instead on the internal design of particular languages and, in literary studies, of particular narratives.¹² Tolkien's contrast between the large-scale poem and the minstrel's lay is of course outdated. Subsequent fieldwork by oral-formulaic theorists brought to light illiterate singers who could improvise poems much longer than *Beowulf* in strict traditional meters (Lord 1960/2000). We cannot simply assume that preliterate Old English poets employed a short form for heroic narratives, and evidence for such a form is in fact very slight. Hypothetical examples of the "Old English heroic lay" are incomplete and might be fragments of longer poems (Stanley 1987).

Tolkien saw many Scandinavian parallels in *Beowulf* but refused to view the poem as "pagan" or "Teutonic" (248), an understandable attitude in 1936, when unscrupulous Nazi academics claimed to find origins of modern German identity, as they defined it, in ancient Germanic culture (Stanley 2005: 279–81). This was not the moment to reconstruct West Germanic literary traditions inherited by England and Germany (Fulk and Cain 2003: 203–4). In concluding remarks to his British audience, Tolkien declares that *Beowulf* "was made in this land, and moves in our northern world beneath our northern sky" (278). Taken at face value, this patriotic flourish may be somewhat misleading. As we have observed, *Beowulf* never moves beneath an English sky. Anyone interested in English culture will obviously need to reckon with *Beowulf*, but the poem has the same importance for all present-day speakers of English, wherever they may live. Tolkien is clearly right, on the other hand, to represent *Beowulf* as a narrative of a "northern world," since it focuses on the area extending from Scandinavia to the Frisian Netherlands. This world lies within the boundaries of several modern states and is culturally ancestral to speakers of several Germanic languages. A resident of modern Friesland, for example, inhabits territory mentioned in *Beowulf* (1063–1159, 2911–21) where a language very similar to Old English was spoken. Individuals who study *Beowulf* for insight into their cultural histories might well regard the poem as in some sense theirs, and the poem is of course easier to use for that purpose if it links to the reader's milieu through a relatively straightforward line of historical development. *Beowulf* can hardly be conceived, however, as the exclusive cultural property of a state.

F. C. Robinson (1985: 7) imagines the author of *Beowulf* as "living in a settled realm, with church and coinage and law codes to help order his existence and written documents to protect his interests and enrich his mind." Characters of Germanic legend, on the other hand, "were deprived of the revelation which offered the poet and his audience escape from the damnation which awaits all heathens, including, apparently, the heroes of *Beowulf*." Robinson's monograph advances our understanding of the poem in many ways – too many to enumerate here – and deserves its wide readership. The hypothesis of a flawed hero receives little support from the language of the text, however. Explicit praise of Beowulf vastly outweighs some criticism for heroic rashness by Hygelac (1992b–97a) and Wiglaf (3076–86), who had tried to dissuade their kinsman from confronting monsters. To a significant extent, Robinson reads against the text from the perspective of Augustinian religious

orthodoxy. Such a reading presupposes composition of the poem within an ideologically coherent age of faith.

Characters in *Beowulf* who seem admirable on a straightforward reading often give thanks to a deity identified by the usual Old English terms for Jehovah, terms like *drihten*, “the Lord,” *god*, “God,” and *metod*, “the Creator.” Robinson explains away such anachronisms by supposing that Old English words for “God” had dual senses in *Beowulf*. When Christian auditors heard a word like *drihten*, Robinson asserts, “they would necessarily have had two apposed meanings in mind: the pre-Christian meaning, which was the only one the pagan characters could know, and the postconversion meaning” (1985: 37–8). This interpretive approach fails to account for use of words like *god* and *drihten* by the poet, who tells us that faith in God helped Beowulf defeat Grendel:

There the monster came to grips with him;
but he remembered the physical strength,
the great gift the Lord had given him,
and he looked to the Almighty for honor,
for comfort and help; therefore he overcame the enemy,
humiliated the spirit from hell.

(1269a–74a)¹³

According to the poet, God intervenes against Grendel’s mother when Beowulf’s weapon fails and the mighty giant throws him to the ground:

Then the son of Ecgtheow would have misadventured
under the earth, that champion of the Geats,
if his corslet had not given him help,
that hard battle-net, and if holy God
had not decided the victory. The wise Lord,
ruler of the skies, decided the matter justly,
effortlessly, after [Beowulf] stood up again.
Then the mailed warrior saw a victorious blade,
an old sword of the giants, doughty of edges.

(1550–8)¹⁴

As Klaeber observes (1950: 187), God’s help consists in pointing out this gigantic sword. After grasping the weapon, Beowulf, the only human strong enough to wield it (1560–1), finds it easy to behead his foe (1563–8). The fight with Grendel’s mother is narrated again in Hrothgar’s hall, this time by Beowulf, who thanks God for saving him in precisely the way described by the author:

I did not easily escape with my life
that combat underwater, risked the adventure
with difficulty. I would have been at once
defeated in battle, if God had not protected me.

With Hrunting I could not in the struggle
 accomplish anything, good though that weapon may be;
 but the Ruler of men allowed me
 to see something wondrous hanging on the wall,
 a huge ancient sword.

(1655a–63a)¹⁵

It could hardly be clearer that the author and the hero have the same deity in mind.

Robinson notices heroic piety but does not take it at face value. “The pagan characters,” he says, “use pious expressions and Christian-sounding allusions which have given some people the impression that Beowulf, Hrothgar, and other characters in the poem are in fact Christians, despite the anachronistic absurdity of such an assumption” (1985: 11). I see two questionable presuppositions here. First, although historians of our era can date Hygelac, it does not follow that the Old English author could do so. There are no dates of any kind in *Beowulf*. Secondly, “pre-Christian” does not necessarily mean “heathen,” as we shall see.

Let us assume with Fulk that *Beowulf* was composed in Mercia about 725 CE. During this era, who would have wanted to hear stories about remote Germanic ancestors? Even a little later, toward the end of the eighth century, one very important Christian wanted to hear such stories. According to his biographer Einhard, Charlemagne “had very old barbarian poems, in which the acts and wars of ancient kings were sung, written out and preserved”; and these seem to have provided entertainment at Charlemagne’s mealtimes, when “histories and the deeds of the ancients were read to him.”¹⁶ Like others who think that Christians necessarily rejected heroic values, Robinson cites disdainful remarks about traditional song by Alcuin, an English religious intellectual in Charlemagne’s service:

Let the words of God be read at the meal of the clergy. There it is proper to listen to the lector, not a harp-player; the sermons of the Fathers, not songs of the people. For what has Ingeld to do with Christ?¹⁷

Here, however, Alcuin is concerned with how a religious official ought to edify his dinner guests. If Alcuin tried to repress Charlemagne’s interest in native epic, the attempt was evidently unsuccessful. Robinson argues that features of Beowulf’s cultural world, like totemic animals, “would likely have assumed heathen associations,” and that “Beowulf’s speeches about the preferability of blood vengeance to mourning and about the importance of fame after death would certainly have carried such connotations” (1985: 11). A duty of vengeance is admittedly hard to reconcile with the New Testament, but this feature of Germanic culture was surprisingly persistent. According to Stenton (1947: 90), “the spirit of the primitive retainer” was still alive in Torhtmund, Alcuin’s contemporary, a minister of King Ethelred who killed the king’s murderer. In a letter dated 801, Alcuin introduces Torhtmund to Charlemagne in terms entirely consistent with the duty of vengeance:

I have been told that some friends of your Flaccus wish to approach your Grace: namely Æpelheard, metropolitan of the Church of Canterbury and pontiff of the first see in Britain; and a former thegn of King Offa, Ceolmund by name, from the kingdom of the Mercians; and also Torhtmund, the faithful servant of King Ethelred, a man of proved loyalty, strenuous in arms, who has boldly avenged the blood of his lord. They were all very true friends to me and were my helpers on my journey and protectors of my pupils as they hastened hither and thither.¹⁸

Alcuin's statement about his pupils illustrates the church's need for heroic support.

As late as the eleventh century, the concept of fame after death was invoked by Ælfric in praise of the martyred Oswald, an Anglo-Saxon warrior king who was also revered as a saint. Compare for example the following line from Ælfric's text with similar language in *Beowulf*:

Þā āsprang his hlīsa geond þā land wīde	(<i>Oswold</i> 239)
[Then his fame spread widely throughout those lands.]	
blæd wīde sprang	
Scyldes eafera Scedelandum in.	(<i>Beowulf</i> 18b–19b)
[The glory of Scyld's son spread widely in Swedish lands.]	

As we have observed, Ælfric's word for fame, *hlīsa*, is a Germanic cognate of Homeric Greek *klé(w)os* and Vedic Sanskrit *śrávas*. Ælfric has chosen *hlīsa* to represent the widening popularity of a heroic martyr's legend that he narrates in an innovative kind of alliterative discourse.¹⁹ In line 239 above, the word is clearly not a half-understood archaism that survives for metrical reasons, as with "Homeric glosses" (Parry 1928). Alliteration of *hlīsa* with *land* cannot be ancient, since *hl*-alliterates only with *h*- in traditional verse. In *Oswold* 239, the alliteration points to the loss of the initial [h] before [l], a sound change not registered in the conservative manuscript spelling.²⁰ Christian martyrs also receive the full heroic treatment in *Fates of the Apostles* (6b–8b):

Lof wīde sprang,
miht ond mǣrðo, ofer middangeard,
þēodnes þegna, þrym unlȳtel.
 The glory of the thanes of the Lord,
their might and fame, spread widely
throughout middle-earth, no little greatness.

Such Judeo-Christian protagonists actually outnumber the Germanic warriors in our corpus of Old English narrative poems. A heroic apostle Thomas appears in the *Heliand*, an alliterative New Testament from the cognate Old Saxon tradition. Thomas urges his companions to fulfill their obligations as thanes of Jesus by suffering death with him, adding: "Than lēbot ūs thoh duom after, / guod uuord for gumon" ("But then glory will live after us, good reputation before men") (4001b–2a).

Given narratives of this kind with unwarlike, non-Germanic heroes, it would be difficult to argue that the surviving verse traditions define an exclusively Germanic “people,” in the sense of “people” rejected by Goffart (2006: x). A verse tradition provides time-honored values authenticated by metrical form that may serve a variety of interests in a hybrid society. As the society changes, archaic values that are still acceptable may retain significant authority.

Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies testify to an interest in Germanic ancestors during the probable era of *Beowulf*. Eighth-century Mercian kings traced their ancestry back to Woden, formerly worshipped as a god (Chambers 1967: 195–8). When a king became Christian, of course, his pedigree would be subsumed under the master historical discourse of the Bible; but this might be achieved in various ways because Germanic king lists did not supply regnal dates. Some West Saxon genealogies show how the integration could be carried out. In these genealogies, characters named in *Beowulf* are placed just after Noah’s flood. One such character named Scaef or Scef is represented as Noah’s son (Chambers 1967: 203–4). In *Beowulf*, Scaef is the father of Scyld, great-great-grandfather of Hrothgar. A royal ancestor situated in this pre-Mosaic era need not have been regarded as heathen.²¹

If characters in *Beowulf* were thought to have lived before Moses, their religious practices make perfect sense and biblical allusions in the poem provide a coherent historical background.²² In Genesis, characters we might think of as heathen still respect Jehovah. Melchizedek, a Canaanite priest of God Most High, bestows his blessing on Abraham, father of the Hebrews, who identifies himself as a worshipper of the same God Most High (15:18–23). When Jehovah appears in a dream to Abimelech, king of Gerar, warning him away from Abraham’s wife Sarah, the Philistine king recognizes his heavenly Lord at once and says that he has not touched the woman, though Abraham has falsely represented Sarah as his sister (20:1–5). God replies, “Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me” (20:6). Abimelech then confronts Abraham, asking, “how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin?” (20:9). Finally, after restoring Sarah to Abraham, Abimelech prays to God, and God heals him, along with his wife and female slaves, who are then able to bear children (20:17). A Pharaoh of Egypt shows similar piety. When Joseph interprets the ruler’s prophetic dreams, attributing this ability to Jehovah, Pharaoh says to his servants, “Can we find such a man as this, in whom is the spirit of God?” (41:38). Joseph’s favor with a God respected by Pharaoh earns him great authority in Egypt (41:40). The same Aramaean Laban whose household gods are stolen by Rachael is the one who says to Jacob, “The Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other” (31:49). No one needs to explain to these foreigners who Jehovah is. The God of Noah has not yet been forgotten in their lands. Genesis represents idol worship as something not entirely excluded by worship of Jehovah. When Jacob goes to Bethel, where Jehovah has instructed him to build an altar, he tells his followers without rancor to put away any foreign gods that are among them, and he hides these gods under the oak of Shechem rather than destroying them (35:2–4).

Where, we need to ask, are the Germanic peoples when religious Hebrews and worshippers of foreign gods mix so freely in the Middle East? On a straightforward reading of Genesis, they are already in Germania. Those who begin work on Babel do so to avoid being “scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (11:4). God’s punishment fits the crime exactly, as Genesis makes clear, stating twice in two consecutive verses that the Lord scatters the builders throughout the earth, not just eventually, but at once, as the way to prevent them from completing Babel (11:8–9). Snorri Sturluson explains what happens afterwards in Germania as a gradual process of forgetting by people obsessed with wealth and power (*Prologue*, 1; Young 1966: 23). Snorri makes no attempt to date the end of this process, when God has been forgotten entirely and heathenism proper begins.

The idea that Hrothgar and his people are represented as heathens comes from *Beowulf* 175a–6a: “Hwīlum hīe gehēton æt hærtrafum/wīgweorþunga” (“Sometimes they made offerings to idols in heathen temples”). These verses do not assert that everyone in Hrothgar’s court was a committed idol worshipper. If we say, “Americans have sometimes made an unfortunate impression abroad,” we will not be understood to claim that all Americans have done so, rather that some Americans have sometimes done so. The grammatical situation is identical in *Beowulf* 175a–6a. In lines 180b–3b, the author says that Danes who worshipped idols were not well acquainted with God and did not even know how to praise him. The same might be said of Jacob’s followers. The *Beowulf* poet adds that damnation is a terrible prospect (183b–6b), but without asserting that any Danes went to hell. Tolkien found this passage stylistically anomalous and thought it might be unoriginal. “If it is original,” he says, “the poet must have intended a distinction between the wise Hrothgar, who certainly knew of and often thanked God, and a certain party of the pagan Danes – heathen priests, for instance, and those that had recourse to them under the temptation of calamity” (287). The poet may simply have wished to emphasize that practices tolerated in pre-Mosaic times would be more dangerous to the souls of his contemporaries.

As Auerbach famously observed (1946: ch. 1), Old Testament style makes little use of circumstantial detail, focusing instead on man’s relation to God. If the *Beowulf* poet situated Germania within a pre-Mosaic world, the blank spaces of biblical history would provide ample room for traditional Germanic content. *Beowulf* provides little insight into pre-Christian religious practice, but the poet’s modernizing strategy does facilitate preservation of secular heroic culture and was arguably designed for just that purpose.²³

Modernization is a curatorial project. Museums, plays by canonical authors like Shakespeare, and academic fields are regularly updated to maintain their cultural importance. Researchers who want to extract history from an epic should first subject apparent cases of anachronism to the closest possible scrutiny, considering what features of the author’s milieu might lead to particular transformations of the past. Sisam (1953: 320) mentions the link to Noah in genealogical lore but dismisses it as unworthy of attention: “The Biblical names,” he says, “show the artificial character of this lengthened pedigree and the crudeness of the connexions that passed muster.

Otherwise they need not detain us.” My intervention has been to take Sisam’s “crude connexions” quite seriously, using them to isolate a restricted domain of anachronism in *Beowulf*. Beyond that domain, I would argue, what looks archaic is likely to be archaic. In defending the sincerity of religious beliefs expressed by the poet, Tolkien provided a valuable corrective to scholarly excesses of the Romantic nationalists; but his blanket skepticism about pre-Christian content in *Beowulf* should be set aside now as rhetorical exaggeration.

Even within the brief compass of this essay, we have seen what look like archaic cultural survivals in a variety of Old English documents, some of them dating from the later Old English period. *Beowulf* can serve as a useful guide to research on such survivals. Alcuin may have scorned heroic poetry, but we have no reason to suppose that his attitude was representative. When the monastic scholar Ælfric refers to the *blīsa* of his Christian warrior-saint, there is little to distinguish that concept of widespread glory from the concept of *blād* in *Beowulf* or indeed from the concept of *kléos* in Homer’s *Iliad*. We cannot simply assume that a Christian writer would reject secular heroic values. In *The Battle of Maldon*, a very late Old English poem about a Viking invasion in 991 CE, heroic English warriors pray to God for success in avenging the death of their lord and friend (262b–64b). Given this sort of historical evidence, it seems implausible to contend, as F. C. Robinson does (1985: 11), that God was widely believed to oppose such vengeance. As we have seen, even Alcuin endorsed the slaying of a lord’s killer.

When no conflict with theological imperatives can arise, poems with prominent Christian content can be surprisingly informative about secular tradition. The alliterative *Gifts of Men*, for example, elaborates a noble status of craft skills and athletic achievements with striking parallels in Old Norse tradition (Russom 1978). In *Gifts*, the scribe is praised first and foremost for manual dexterity as a curious sort of scholar-athlete (96b–7b). Politically prominent writers like Alcuin deserve the attention they have received, of course; but for researchers interested in Anglo-Saxon England, anonymous poems offer a necessary supplement. *Beowulf* is a historical document of the first importance.²⁴

Notes

- 1 On entry of European barbarians into mainstream Western civilization, see Fletcher (1998).
- 2 Neckel 1983: 5, stanza 20. Subsequent citations of Eddic poetry refer to this edition by stanza number. *Urð* was the norn most deeply rooted in Germanic tradition (Dronke 1997: 128). I use the term *cognate* not only in its usual sense, for words descended from the same word in a prehistoric language like Germanic (e.g. *Urð* and Old English *myrd*), but also for poetic traditions with a common origin in a prehistoric culture. Dates of the historical period cited below are all from the current era (CE).
- 3 This and subsequent citations from *Beowulf* refer to Klaeber (1950) by line number or by verse number (which adds “a” for the first verse in the line or “b” for the second). Citations from other Old English poems refer to Krapp and Dobbie (1931–53). Old

Saxon poetry comes from Behaghel (1965) and Old High German poetry from Braune (1979). I add marks of vowel length where the edition does not provide them.

- 4 Subsequent references to Tolkien (1936) are by page number only.
- 5 Snorri, *Gylfaginning*, 34; Young 1966: 55–6. In citations of *Gylfaginning*, the first reference is to the manuscript chapter number in Faulkes (1982). Strange kinships in early Germanic narratives can be explained as shamanic transformations (Gloseck 1989).
- 6 “Sēle bið æghwām, / þæt hē his frēond wrece, þonne hē fela murne. / Ūre æghwylc sceal ende gebīdan / worolde lifes; wyrce sē þe mōte / dōmes ær dēaþe; þæt biþ drihtguman / unlifgendum æfter sēlest” (1384b–89b).
- 7 Tolkien is praised in Watkins’s chapter on Germanic dragons (1995: 414 n. 1).
- 8 For contemporary thinking about Indo-European culture, see Mallory (1989).
- 9 For previous discussion, see Taylor (1966) and Dronke (1969).
- 10 In *Vafðrúðnismál*, stanza 20, Odin asks the giant “hvaðan iorð um kom eða uphiminn / fyrst” (“whence earth came, and heaven above, at first”). The Sigurd example comes from *Oddrúnargrátr*, stanza 17. Watkins (1995: 418 n. 8) regards the Eddic “earth / up-heaven” passages as evidence for a common Germanic formula with possible Indo-European precedents. There is a Danish analogue in a runic passage on the Ribe Healing Stick (c. 1300) that begins with the healer’s request for power: “Jörð bið ek varða ok upphimin / sól ok Sancta[m] Mariu ok sjálfan Guð dróttin / at hann lé mér læknið hönd ok líf tungu” (“I bid the earth ensure, and the heaven above, sun and Saint Mary, and God the Lord Himself, that he lend me a healer’s hands and a lively tongue”). The translation and normalized transcription are from McKinnell and Simek 2004: 142.
- 11 The contracted Norse form *unz* and uncontracted *oð þæt* in *Beowulf* both have a descendant of Germanic **unþa*, “until” followed by a subordinating conjunction.
- 12 This positivistic feature of structuralism was abandoned several decades ago by theoretical linguists. Hogan (1997) critiques structuralist literary theory from the perspective of contemporary linguistics and uses comparative methodology to formulate an alternative.
- 13 “þær him āglāca ætgrāpe wearð; / hwæþre hē gemunde mægenes strenge, / gimfæste gife, ðē him God sealde, / ond him tō Anwaldan āre gelýfde, / frōfre ond fultum; ðy hē þone fēond ofercwōm, / gehnægde helle gāst.”
- 14 “Hæfde ðā forsiðod sunu Ecgþēowes / under gynne grund, Gēata cempa, / nemne him heaðobyrne helpe gefremede, / herenet hearde, – ond hālig God / gewēold wīgsigor; wītig Drihten, / rodera Rædend hit on right gescēd / yðelice, syþðan hē eft āstōd. / Geseah ðā on searwum sigeēadig bil, / ealdsweord eotenisc ecgum þyhtig.” The poet heaps ironic scorn on the son who starts the killing (761–6, 782b–8a, 809a–23a), but the mother, who seeks vengeance (1276b–8b), is portrayed simply as a dangerous foe.
- 15 “Ic þæt unsōfte ealdre gedīgde, / wigge under wætere, weorc genēþde / earfoðlice; ætrihte wæs / gūð getwāfed, nymðe mec God scylde. / Ne meahte ic æt hilde mid Hruntinge / wiht gewyrcean, þeah þæt wāpen duge; / ac mē geūðe ylða Waldend, / þæt ic on wāge geseah wlitig hangian / ealdsweord ēacen.” *Hrunting* is a named weapon, perhaps of archaic type (Klaeber 1950: xviii).
- 16 “Item barbara et antiquissima carmina, quibus veterum regum actus et bella caneantur, scripsit memoriaeque mandavit” (ch. 29; Garrod and Mowat 1925: 30). While Charlemagne dined, “Legebantur ei historiae et antiquorum res gestae” (ch. 24; *ibid.*: 26).
- 17 Dümmler (1895: 183, no. 124): “Verba Dei legantur in sacerdotali convivio. Ibi decet lectorem audiri, non citharistam; sermones patrum, non carmina gentilium. Quid Hiniildus cum Christo?” I cite F. C. Robinson’s translation (1985: 8) as one not biased toward my argument. Ingeld is a legendary Germanic hero mentioned in *Beowulf* (2064b).

- 18 Dümmler (1895: 376, no. 231). Whitelock's translation (1979: 795) is cited as an impartial witness. In the Latin text, the clause about Torhtmund reads "Torchtmundum, Hedilredi regis fidelem famulum, virum in fide probatum, strenuum in armis, qui fortiter sanguinem domini sui vindicavit."
- 19 "Natale Sancti Oswaldi regis et martyris" (Skeat 1900: 124–43).
- 20 I owe thanks to Jacqueline Haring Russom for permission to use her unpublished research on Ælfric's alliterative practice.
- 21 Although he does not situate *Beowulf* in a pre-Mosaic age, Tolkien (270) does suggest that characters like Hrothgar were modeled in certain respects on Old Testament leaders.
- 22 Genesis is cited from the translation of May and Metzger (1965). For the sake of argument, I show that the *Beowulf* narrative is consistent with this philologically refined understanding of Genesis, though the poet's understanding might well have been acquired from someone with a royalist agenda.
- 23 As Hill observes (1986: 47), *Beowulf* reflects the author's political as well as religious interests, "and the fact that he was a royalist of a specific sort – one concerned with preserving and honoring the ancient roots of Scylding kingship – is profoundly important for our understanding of the poem."
- 24 I owe thanks to the late R. M. Good for assistance with Old Testament philology.

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The *Nibelungenlied* – Myth and History: A Middle High German Epic Poem at the Crossroads of Past and Present, Despair and Hope

ALBRECHT CLASSEN

Where the centre of life is a great man's house, and where the most brilliant society is that which is gathered at his feasts, where competitive boasting, story-telling, and minstrelsy are the principal intellectual amusements, it is inevitable that these should find their way into a kind of literature which has no foundation except experience and tradition. Where fighting is more important than anything else in active life, and at the same time is carried on without organisation or skilled combinations, it is inevitable that it should be described as it is in the Iliad, the Song of Maldon and Song of Roland, and the Icelandic Sagas, as a series of personal encounters, in which every stroke is remembered.

(Ker 1957: 12–13)

Literary texts have considerably more significance for society at large, or for people's lives, than is commonly assumed. The literary discourse offers, undoubtedly, entertainment and excitement on a superficial level, and literary history provides an overview of cultural values and ideals representative of the society that produced such texts. But if we take a hard look at some of the classics, but also at some so far neglected or marginalized texts, we easily recognize that fictional texts offer deep insights into, and reflections of, processes of identity formation, self-perceptions of a community or country, gender relations, attitudes toward old people and children, the obscure realms of fear and other emotions, and the relationship between humans and environment at specific times and locations. All these aspects are objects of the history of mentality and everyday life, and they allow us to grasp the enormous relevance of poetic texts for critical investigations in the areas of anthropology, psychology, history, religious studies, music, art history, economic history, and sociology, providing historical and cultural perspectives.¹

The world of heroic epics, above all, invites the same kinds of questions, especially because they normally also stand at the crossroads of orality and history, past and present, individual versus society, the hero within versus the existential threat from without (or even from within): hence they both mirror and are based on the history

of outstanding individuals and entire peoples who, as W. T. H. Jackson formulates it, mostly have the “ability to laugh fate to scorn.”² Moreover, their unique character as semi-historical, semi-religious or mythical, and semi-prophetic texts allows us to probe their messages even further as reflections of human subconsciousness and man’s quest to connect with a mythical past or magical otherworld.³ This fully confirms medieval notions of heroic experiences that were expressed in heroic epics – a term coined only by modern literary scholarship, whereas medieval poets only talked about deeds, *gestes*, wars, and fights of outstanding heroes (Reichert forthcoming).

Virtually all heroic epics address in varying degrees the following topics: (1) encounters with monsters and creatures of an “other” world; (2) transgression and infringement of rules, laws, and other social orders and norms, and their restitution; and (3) the destruction and reconstruction of values and ideals (Haubrichs 1988: 106–34; cf. Haug 1995: 72–90). They are cast in a historical framework and evoke awe, fear, hope, and inspiration, but they also challenge the audience to contrast the *bathos* of the present with the *pathos* of the past.

These general observations also apply to the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*, an epic masterpiece that has been the focus of much research over the last 250 years.⁴ Numerous questions have been raised regarding the interpretation of this text and its historical context, especially the historical background, the degree to which this epic was based on oral sources and continued to mirror the world of orality, the relationship between the protagonists, the role of revenge and blood feud, the confrontation between self and other, the relevance of gift giving, the management of anger and other emotions for political purposes, gender relations, sexuality, royal power, the representative function of the *Nibelungenlied* in the historical context of 1200, the significance of myths, and the reception of this heroic epic until today.⁵

The wealth of critical approaches to this epic poem clearly indicates its high literary value, based on an enormously complex structure, plot, and characterization of the protagonists; but it also signals how much the *Nibelungenlied* can justifiably be used as a mirror of the historical developments in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁶ Further, we would probably not be entirely off-track if we investigated possible traces of ancient matriarchy in this epic (Classen 1991, 1992), or examined how the poet of the *Nibelungenlied* viewed foreigners, non-Christian peoples, and different ethnic groups (Sager 2003). Concomitantly, literary scholars have rightly underscored the political, social-historical, economic, didactic, and religious dimensions reflected upon in this heroic epic (Hansen 1990; Brandt 1997). By emphasizing the multiplicity of possible readings, we realize how much this epic poem truly represents world literature insofar as it contains timeless themes and topics and keeps challenging every generation of scholars and readers anew (Ehrismann 1975; Heinze and Waldschmidt 1991). It thus makes perfect sense to read the *Nibelungenlied* in the context of European heroic poetry and, by the same token, in the context of the heroic element per se on a global level because it belongs to the world of myths in their anthropological dimension.⁷

In the present context, however, our purpose will be, in the first place, to investigate the range of possible historical references, sources, and events with which the

anonymous poet might have been familiar. Moreover, and more critically, we also need to revisit the question of how much the surviving manuscripts of the *Nibelungenlied* reflect the transition of orality to literacy; what we know about the so-called *Nibelungen scriptorium* (Bumke 1996: 590–4; Wolf 1995) and the poet's patron, the Bishop of Passau, Wolfger von Erla (Boshof and Knapp 1994); and how we situate this epic within the broader literary context of heroic poetry, considering its mythical dimension.

An important caveat, however, must be considered before we proceed further. Many attempts, obviously appealing to modern tastes for reviving a mythical past,⁸ have been undertaken to establish concrete correlations between specific historical events and figures on the one hand, and the *Nibelungenlied* on the other (e.g., Breuer and Breuer 1995; Mackensen 1984: 35–73), and many similarities of names have been noticed in historical chronicles and in the epic. Despite all this, it can no longer be maintained, as traditionally espoused by the old Lachmann school, that the extant text in its plethora of manuscripts was directly built upon those ancient sources, as if the anonymous poet had tried to make sense out of them and to create a new meaningful work composed of individual epic songs (Baker forthcoming).

The *Nibelungenlied* is, first of all, a literary, a heroic text, dating from c. 1200, and it did not assume the function of a chronicle to combat common memory loss or naively to record past events simply for keep's sake. By the same token, the poet, at least of the version in manuscript B, was fully aware of the interconnection between past and present and the need to cast historical events, insofar as they allowed for a symbolic and allegorical reading, in poetic terms, focusing on the social structures and organizational models presented here as reflections of heroic values and ideals (Lienert 2003: 101–2). The first stanza reveals this dialectical relationship in clearest terms:

We have been told in ancient tales many marvels of famous heroes, of mighty toil, joys, and high festivities, of weeping and wailing, and the fighting of bold warriors – of such things you can now hear wonders unending.⁹

As both new historicism and new philology, along with German studies (Classen 2000), have taught us, the differences between a literary and a non-fictional text are very hard to fathom, and often the overlapping of both represents the norm, especially in the Middle Ages. Many chronicles, for instance, contained numerous narrative elements, and many romances included long lists of factual accounts, data, and discussions of specific historical, scientific, and religious content.¹⁰ In line with Hayden White's significant conclusions concerning the validity and meaning of all textual statements,¹¹ it might even be more appropriate today to talk of different types of narrative discourses, instead of searching for an imaginary differentiation between literature – in the sense defined in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – and factual texts.

Let us briefly examine some of the key figures and their connection with historical names, without aiming for a comprehensive survey. The Burgundians, for instance, were a Germanic tribe that had settled near the middle section of the Rhine since the

early fifth century, but whether they lived near the area of Worms, as the epic poem claims, cannot be confirmed on the basis of archaeological evidence. In 435 and 436 the Burgundians who lived on the western side of the river moved into the Roman province of Belgica. The Romans regarded this as a threat, or as a rebellion, and the general Aëtius attacked them with the help of auxiliary Hunnish troops. The Burgundian king and most of his warriors were allegedly killed, and the remainder of the people were settled in the upper Rhône region. At the end of the fifth century, the *Lex Burgundiorum* was copied down, which referred to some of their ancient kings, such as Gibica, Gundomaris, Gislharius, and Gundaharius, who are supposed to be the models for the royal brothers in the *Nibelungenlied*. In some spurious way the death of the King of the Huns, Attila, is also associated with the *Nibelungenlied* because the historically documented Attila died in 453 while sleeping with a Germanic woman, Hildico, which might be a nickname for Kriemhild. Then we know of a Visigothic queen, Brunichildis, married to the Franconian King Sigibert I, who is somehow associated with the literary figure Siegfried, especially because of her tremendous political power and her most tragic and gruesome death as a victim of her own political machinations that caused bitter hostility and hatred (Bitel 2002: 82–4; see also Gentry et al. 2002: 49–140). For the explanation of the name of the warriors in Siegfried's service, and of the Burgundians in the second part of the romance, *Nibelung*, we can fall back on ancient epics in the Old Norse tradition, but nothing specific and certain can be adduced, especially because we always remain on a mytho-historical level.

However, public interest in the epic material was widespread already in the eighth and ninth centuries, as various art objects and epitaphs indicate (stone images and carvings from northern Europe and Spain, for example, in Sangüesa in Navarra), although these do not necessarily confirm the historical accuracy of the heroic account. Actually, far from it! Instead, they demonstrate how much the early medieval audiences tried to secure the memory of these subject matters. However, the gulf separating fictional account and historical events proves too striking to be overlooked. It does not matter whether we search in the *Atlakviða* or in Saxo Grammaticus's *Historia Danorum* for evidence that the *Nibelungenlied* was based on an actual historical account because ultimately we are dealing with an heroic epic (just like *Beowulf* and various parts of the *Edda*) and not with a chronicle text.¹² As J. K. Newman affirms: "Germanic e[pic] deals mainly with the tragedy that results from conflicting loyalties to family, spouse, feudal lord, and comrades-in-arms" (1993: 365). His definition of the heroic epic also deserves to be quoted (*ibid.*):

Most Germanic poetry, though emerging from a Christian society, is heavily overlaid with pre-Christian elements. A sense of fatality stronger than Christian providence is conspicuous. Although *wyrd* or fate may relent and save an doomed man if, as the *Beowulf* poet says, his courage is good, the hero usually fights a losing battle, knowing the odds are against him. He is controlled, moreover, by a strict code of honor that requires at all costs loyalty to lord and friends. The earl Byrthnōth in the Anglo-Saxon *Battle of Maldon*, Roland in the *Chanson de Roland*, and Hagen in the *Nibelungenlied*, having made tragic errors in judgment, all prefer honor to life.

The key, important and always to be kept in mind, is that the epic interlaces the oral with the written¹³ and the historical with the mythical. The narrator unmistakably projects an image of well-defined historical events, centering on a royal family with three brothers and one sister. An outsider, Siegfried, arrives from the area of Xanten, today in the Netherlands, and woos Kriemhild, but he does not fully fit into the realm of normal people; instead he seems to have originated in a world of demi-gods, considering his enormous strength and his uncanny association with dwarves, over whom he rules, and dragons, one of which he slays, assuming its magic power by taking a bath in its blood (Ehrismann 1996). Although Hagen, King Gunther's advisor and intimate assistant, has never seen Siegfried before his arrival, he knows everything about his past and recognizes the foreign hero at first sight. He reports mysterious deeds accomplished by the young man in his struggle against various creatures of the underworld. A short excerpt may suffice to illustrate the fanciful and yet seemingly realistic elements characterizing Hagen's speech:

They gave him Nibelung's sword in payment [for dividing the Nibelung treasure], but they had scant profit from the service which the good warrior was to render them. He was unable to finish his task, so enraged were they. But although they had 12 brave men among their friends there – mighty giants they were – how could it avail them? Siegfried slew them in a fury and he also subdued seven hundred men of Nibelung-land with the good sword Balmung . . . and he came into great peril from Alberich who hoped to avenge his masters there and then, till Siegfried's huge strength was brought home to him . . . and he won from Alberich the cloak of invisibility. Thus Siegfried, terrible man, was now lord of all the treasure. (28)

There is something uncanny and mysterious about Siegfried, his archaic strength, and also his ignorance and lack of understanding of courtly manners, speech, strategies, and diplomacy, which will ultimately make him a victim of the powerful manipulations of Hagen who weaves a devious net for his arch-enemy, the demi-god, Kriemhild's husband (Classen 1998, 2003). Whereas traditional German scholarship has refused a mythical interpretation of Siegfried, emphasizing instead the struggle with internal problems at Gunther's court and social-political conflicts among competing power centers (Wolf 1979: 72), others have pleaded for reading Siegfried as a hero from the world of fairy tales (Reichert 2005: 449–51). But efforts to characterize this monumental figure as determined simply by fearlessness, lack of concerns, joyfulness, and morbidity fall far short of a full understanding of the impact Siegfried truly exerts on the other heroes and of the mythical dimension that has ensured his immense popularity well into the twenty-first century.

Significantly, Hagen also emerges as a participant in, or at least witness of, the mysterious world of the beyond, when he and his masters are approaching their death. Long after Siegfried has been killed out of envy, fear, and unjustified distrust, and Kriemhild has married a second husband, the king of the Huns, Attila (Etzel), the Burgundians are invited to a court festival at Gran where their sister now rules as a mighty queen. Before they cross the Danube, Hagen explores the embankment and discovers a spring where water-fairies are taking a bath. At first they escape, but

since he has taken their clothing, they are forced to enter into a bargain, promising to foretell the Burgundians' future in the land of the Huns. The first, Hadeburg, reveals that they will travel safely to King Attila's court and gain great glory, which pleases Hagen and calms his worries. But the second fairy, Sieglind, shatters his newly found confidence and warns him: "Turn back – there is still time! For, bold knights, you have been invited to Etzel's country in order to die there! All who ride to that land have linked their hands with Death!" (194). Only the king's chaplain, she predicts, will survive.

Undaunted by these warnings, Hagen proceeds with his plans and calmly asks them about a ford to cross the river. When he finally takes the entire army across, he deliberately throws the chaplain into the water, knowing that he cannot swim, to test the validity of the fairies' prophecy. All are shocked, but Hagen does not allow anyone to help the innocent victim who finally, with God's help, reaches the safe shore: "Standing up, he shook his cassock, and this brought it home to Hagen that there would be no escaping the fate which the wild nixies had foretold" (198). Indeed, the doom of all is predetermined, and along with them Kriemhild and almost everyone at Attila's court will die in the furious battle triggered by the queen's unquenchable desire for revenge. It might go too far to claim that, although Etzel's (Attila's) court "may seem to have more in common with the historical world of Burgundy and Xanten than with the Otherworld of Isenstein or Nibelungenland, its poetic representation as a literal kingdom of the dead places it firmly in the realm of the Otherworldly" (Lionarons 1998: 171). But the catastrophic conclusion forces us to realize that the combination of the mythical with the historical represents a most dangerous amalgam. The anonymous poet of *Diu Klage*, or *The Lament*, who focuses entirely on the few survivors' laments and mourning, both at Attila's court and various courts in the west (Vienna, St Pölten, Passau, Worms), harbors some hope for the future, concluding with the coronation of King Gunther's son as his successor.¹⁴ But both the *Nibelungenlied* and *Diu Klage*, which were almost always copied together in the same manuscripts (Heinzle 1998), convey sinister signals about the tragic consequences of the collision of two entirely different worlds, despite various attempts to establish bonds of love and marriage.

Many medieval authors dealt with the same issue: we need think only of Marie de France's *lai* "Bisclavret," or the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The entire cycle of *Dietrich* epics in thirteenth-century Germany, the Old French *chansons de geste*, and the large corpus of late medieval prose novels (*Volksbücher*) are often predicated on the clash between representatives of the self and the other.¹⁵

But the power of the mythical other seems to be strangely broken and lost at the end of this epic. First, Siegfried had been almost invincible because he had taken a bath in the dragon's blood, except that a leaf had fallen on his shoulder, keeping him vulnerable after all and eventually causing his death at the hand of Hagen. Ironically, Kriemhild reveals Siegfried's "Achilles' Heel" to Hagen by sewing a cross on her husband's clothing, assuming that this would enable Hagen to protect Siegfried. The very opposite is the case, and the human hero, though himself a highly liminal character (Haymes 1986a: vii), overpowers his arch-opponent and destroys

his magical power. But Hagen succumbs to his destiny, we might say, because he disregards his own limits and has no respect for his human frailty. His disrespect for human nature brings death upon all of the Burgundians.

Next, the mighty queen Brunhild demonstrates how critical and prone to conflict the encounter between man and representatives of another world can be. To do justice to her, we would have to consider the archaic sources underlying her character development and intriguing relationship with Siegfried, reflected in faint allusions in the *Thidrekssaga* (Steger 1996). In the *Nibelungenlied*, these ancient traditions have been watered down considerably but, as numerous scholars have pointed out, the men's fear of the mighty Brunhild continues to exert a tremendous influence. Gunther learns of this powerful queen – exactly how remains unclear, but her mythical fame has obviously spread as far as the court in Worms: “Tidings never heard before had crossed the Rhine, telling how, beyond it, there lived many lovely maidens. Good King Gunther conceived the idea of winning one, and his heart thrilled at the thought of it” (53). We are not informed why he fancies to seek precisely this bride, especially since the dangers to all men are so clearly visible:

She was of vast strength and surpassing beauty. With her love as the prize, she vied with brave warriors at throwing the javelin, and the noble lady also hurled the weight to a great distance and followed with a long leap; and whoever aspired to her love had, without fail, to win these three tests against her, or else, if he lost but one, he forfeited his head. (53)

Significantly, Siegfried advises against this plan because he knows of the dangers involved, but Hagen dares him: “seeing that he is so knowledgeable about Brunhild's affairs” (53); and when Gunther agrees to offer his own sister Kriemhild as Siegfried's bride if they succeed in winning the competition against Brunhild, Siegfried finally consents to assist the Burgundian king in his risky project. Tragically, however, Gunther is no match for the Icelandic queen, and he would have miserably lost his life in this preposterous enterprise if he had not been supported by Siegfried. The latter achieves this goal by means of his heroic strength – he can throw the javelin and the stone farther than the queen, and he jumps farther than she, even while carrying the king with him. This fact plays a major role in the subsequent episode back at Gunther's court, because Siegfried owns a magical cloak that makes him invisible and provides him with the additional strength of 12 men. We learn this just after Gunther and Siegfried have agreed on their plan: “Siegfried would have to take with him the magic cloak which he had won so manfully from the dwarf Alberich, and at such peril. Wearing it, he gained the strength of twelve beyond that of his own powerful frame” (54).

Surprisingly, all this physical prowess does little to overcome Brunhild on behalf of Gunther in the second wedding night. Initially, the queen, seriously doubting her husband's true strength, violently resists his attempts to sleep with her and humiliates him by hanging him on a nail on the wall. Only Siegfried can finally defeat her and crush all her power, but he succeeds in this only when he himself

seems to be forced to succumb to her. First, she carries him to a corner and “rammed him between the wall and a coffer” (92). At this moment Siegfried sees his whole life and that of all men pass before his eyes, and he deeply worries about a global reversal of gender roles if he loses in this battle: “if I now lose my life to a girl, the whole sex will grow uppish with their husbands for ever after, though they would otherwise never behave so” (92).¹⁶ So, out of shame and embarrassment, he rallies all his remaining strength and finally manages to squash her in a most brutal manner, even if, at first, she still seems to be superior, since she “gripped his hands so powerfully that the blood spurted from his nails and he was in agony” (92). This indicates that even the seemingly invincible Siegfried has a body that can be penetrated, wounded, and killed.¹⁷

Certainly, both Siegfried and Gunther succeed with their plan to reduce Brunhild and secure the rule of patriarchy, but uncannily, as the narrative development indicates, this also provides the catalyst for their own demise because they have attempted to transgress their personal limitations as members of the human community, trying to appropriate mythical powers for their mundane existence. The Burgundian king, for instance, foolishly woos the mighty queen Brunhild in order to gain control over her, although he does not belong to her league, so to speak. Siegfried, on the other hand, gains magic power but does not understand how to handle it properly. Not surprisingly, he is later, upon his visit at Gunther’s court, murdered by Hagen who utilizes this convenient occasion – allegedly to avenge Brunhild – to get rid of his jealously watched opponent. In a more or less parallel movement, Gunther will die in Gran in his own sister’s prison as the last but one survivor of the entire Burgundian army, perhaps, as we might say, as a punishment for his transgressions in marrying Brunhild and allowing Siegfried’s murder. The battle of the genders thus reaches a ghastly and devastating conclusion, which the poet of the epic poem *Die Klage* only knows to lament, without offering a solid alternative.

Considering the countless conflicts, tensions, desires, frustrations and aggressions resulting from the interaction of genders, or lack thereof, in the culture that emerged in the twelfth century, manifested mostly in courtly romances and love poetry but also in heroic epics such as the *Nibelungenlied*, we can grasp the great significance of this poem as a distant mirror of social, economic, political, and especially emotional issues determining the history of that period.¹⁸ After all, if we consider the enormously rich manuscript tradition and hence also the remarkably long reception history of the *Nibelungenlied* that lasted far into the sixteenth century and resumed again in the late eighteenth century (Flood 2006; Classen 2006b), we can safely claim that this heroic epic represents a literary forum for a mythical past, horrible as it might have been, with which people in German-speaking lands have regularly been able to associate both in the Middle Ages and in modern times.¹⁹

What would have been so appealing about this epic? What constitutes its continued attraction both in Europe and in the United States, not to mention other continents?²⁰ The answer to this question rests not only in the *Nibelungenlied* itself but in the genre of heroic epics as such that were composed all over the world and seem to

address some fundamental human quest to come to terms with existential fears, threats, desires, needs, and experiences. Thus the *Nibelungenlied* deals with many themes and issues of a most intriguing nature; for example, Siegfried's defeat of the dwarves and the dragon, two archetypal groups of otherness, somehow signals the elimination or ensured marginalization of creatures outside the human fold (Harms and Jaeger 1997; Classen 1999a). The epic also reflects men's deep-seated fear of the monstrous female, represented by Brunhild, which might be a remote reflection of the archaic struggle between a patriarchal and a matriarchal power system, whether or not matriarchal societies ever existed. After all, misogyny has long and deep roots, and mythical traditions about dangerous and powerful women are widespread. More specifically, Gunther's ludicrous humiliation as husband in his first wedding night and his dependence on Siegfried to get his monstrous wife tamed – whether the latter rapes her physically or simply takes away her belt and ring as signs of a metaphorical rape (Gephart 2005: 72–7) – illuminate the extent to which major conflicts between perception and reality, between men's claim of political power and their actual strength, distort and then rupture the traditional fabric of heroic society – that is, of a society determined primarily by heroic, warrior values.

The terribly disjointed, ambivalent, duplicitous, and deliberately misleading exchanges among the protagonists ultimately illustrate the breakdown both of a communicative community²¹ and of gender relations, and this at a time when courtly love assumed a central position in the public discourse of the courtly world in twelfth-century Europe (Schultz 2006). We may also argue that the *Nibelungenlied*, though not historical in any narrow sense of the word, generically reflects upon crucial historical events in the past, such as major conflicts experienced by various Germanic tribes – in this case especially the Burgundians – during the age of migration. However, the real impetus of the epic rests on fundamental emotions regarding the connection between man and the otherworld, on conflicts among heroes, profound tensions between genders, and the catastrophic consequences of hatred and revenge. Tragically, this is the very stuff of history, as legions of chronicles from the entire Middle Ages confirm, filled as they are with wars, feuds, sieges, murder, and other conflicts (Rosenwein 1998; Classen 2006a). The *Nibelungenlied*, though belonging to the world of literature, still reflects the concern with the dangerous failures of human communication as they were common around 1200.

In a brilliant analysis of the psychological elements driving the heroic narrative, Irmgard Gephart observes that the events in Worms illustrate the devastating results of the disintegration of basic instincts and motivational drives (“eine Welt desintegrierter Triebkräfte”) in a society predicated on courtliness and love that comes to realize that it has been replaced by one in which hatred, shame, anger, deception, humiliation, fear, jealousy, and other basic instincts dominate (Gephart 2005: 76). In light of this analysis we understand the true significance of *Die Klage* because, whereas the *Nibelungenlied* provides the literary framework for the collapse of heroic society, the *Lament* makes a serious attempt to come to terms with the consequences of totally uncontrolled violence and the resulting pain, grief, and mourning.²² This alerts us to the heroic epic's fundamental cathartic function in which the triumphs

and defeats of the protagonist at times seem to serve as mirrors of our own actions or needs.

As Jan-Dirk Müller (1998: 270–95) and Irmgard Gephart (2005: 47–62) observe, some of the critical conflicts in the *Nibelungenlied* result from a discrepancy between appearance and reality, pretense and actuality, and words or symbols and objects. But the initial competition between Siegfried and Hagen also alerts us to another, most important dimension reflected in the heroic discourse, the struggle for political and military superiority and domination. We do not necessarily have to correlate the events in the literary text with the political events determining the history of Germany around 1200 in order to understand the timeless nature of this epic poem.²³ Violence and revenge, blood feud and fear, transgression of social mores and divine laws, unleashed wrath and blasphemous hubris, ignorance and intellectual blindness dominate the events, and yet audiences have almost always been driven to pay close attention to the evolution of the narrative because the poem reflects a most troublesome fascination with war, death, and the Armageddon of an entire people.²⁴

Certainly, the *Nibelungenlied* is the result of a long process of transmission and reception involving somehow early medieval history and events affecting the twelfth century. It clearly stands at the crossroads of orality and literacy, as reflected by its formulaic language, rhyme scheme, meter, and other linguistic elements (Borghart 1977), but the critical issue has nothing to do with either aspect. Surprisingly, the world of Christianity hardly surfaces: there are only a few references to members of the Christian Church, such as the chaplain whom Hagen tosses into the Danube, and the priest in the cathedral at Worms who, though not mentioned in the text, must have administered the mass after Kriemhild publicly insulted Brunhild and displayed the humiliating objects proving the latter's shame of having lain in Siegfried's arms before she had done so with Gunther. Kriemhild is concerned about King Attila not being a Christian. But the poet does not care about religion and basically focuses only on mythical forces and figures. In fact, the *Nibelungenlied* might best be described as an epic in which a fundamental struggle takes place involving two cultural dimensions: the world of the courts, or human civilization in its ordinary appearance, and the world of the mythic other, with dwarves, dragons, monster women and monster men. We might agree with Müller (1998) that at the end the Burgundians have also turned into Nibelungs, hence are transformed into monstrous creatures who accomplish heroic feats fighting like berserks, but both the monsters and the berserks are defeated and die on the battlefield because for many reasons they no longer fit into human society.

Comparing, for instance, *Beowulf*, *El Cid*, *Le Chanson de Roland*, the *Nibelungenlied*, and, say, the *Njáls Saga*, we realize that the heroic epic consistently deals with the last struggle of a lone protagonist who fights for the well-being of his community, his lord, his family, or his people, but who is ultimately overcome and dies. His death, however, guarantees, in a mythical manner, the survival of the human world, though the price to be paid by posterity consists of enormous grief and suffering, as reflected by *Die Klage* and *Beowulf*. Nevertheless, life continues, and the heroic epic does not necessarily serve as a platform for an imminent apocalypse.

The hero's death signals the end of an old world and social order, but a new one is certainly present on the horizon as well. Considering this archetypal theme, it is no wonder that epic poetry survived both in its oral and its written form, and the almost incredible reception history of all major heroic epics until today confirms that their accounts of heroic deeds and struggles are of timeless value and significance. Not surprisingly, we can thus read Homer's *Iliad* right next to the *Nibelungenlied* as well as (if we are willing to identify these as heroic epics) Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.

But the hero would not be a hero if the minstrel did not sing about his admirable, daunting, sometimes also horrifying performance.²⁵ The *Nibelungenlied* concretely reflects this dimension that is important to all heroic epics both by referring to the actual oral account and through oral performances of individual protagonists; thus, for example, Hagen relates everything he knows about young Siegfried to his lords (27–8), and one of the ladies-in-waiting at Brunhild's court reports to her queen what she has observed about the unknown guests, though she strongly suspects one among them to be Siegfried (62). In the contemporary *Klage*, certainly a sequel to the *Nibelungenlied*, we learn that Bishop Pilgrim of Passau,

out of love for his nephews, ordered to be put down in Latin how everything had occurred, so that anyone hearing about it afterwards would have an accurate account of how, from the outset, it came about, and how it concluded, about the trials of the good squires and how they all met their end. He had it all committed to writing.

But *Diu Klage* has not come down to us in Latin; we have only a Middle High German version, and the narrator himself confirms, "and it has often been written down since then in German. Old and young alike are familiar with it."²⁶

Certainly, the *Nibelungenlied* and *Diu Klage* report historical events, though in the mythical past, yet they transform them entirely into a timeless narrative determined by somber warnings about the apocalyptic consequences of transgressions concerning the principles of loyalty, love, friendship, honesty, and the core values of heroism. Much is to be said for the emphasis Jan-Dirk Müller (1998: 440) places on the poet's criticism of degenerate courtly society, or of the warrior world of the past, but the true message seems to focus on a quest for new human values, for a communicating community, and for a world where both genders accept each other on equal footing. At the same time, the epic does not necessarily idealize the warrior caste despite its glorious depiction of Hagen and the Burgundian kings, along with scores of their vassals, including Rüedeger, perhaps the most tragic figure who is tied by feudal obligations of loyalty to both sides in the final conflict (Hoffmann 1992: 155 with relevant bibliography). The "epidemic of violence," as Müller calls it (1998: 447–50), affects almost everyone, and it leaves no one unscathed. But among the victims are also the social institutions, the fundamental means of communication, the cultural connections between peoples, and the critical values of human society. Nevertheless, the very fact that the epic was preserved for posterity and that *Diu Klage* illustrates how to come to terms with such a cataclysmic outburst of aggression

offers hope and signals the way in which both epics, if not most others, should be read: both as reflections of historic catastrophes and as means by which audiences can learn from historical events and find paths into the future. The literary discourse offers, after all, hope to overcome the mythical past and to learn from previous mistakes, building the platform for future developments.

Although the *Nibelungenlied* seems far removed from the world of modern readers or listeners, it has never lost its profound appeal and inspiration because of the poet's most impressive skill in coming to terms with archaic and archetypal motives, themes, and concerns. These continue, somehow, to be of deep relevance for us even today because issues such as revenge, hatred, jealousy, war, and struggles for power tend to vex all people at all times (Martin 2006). The questions raised by the epic continue to agitate modern readers, and the dilemmas and aporias the heroes face remain meaningful even to us if they are properly translated into modern terms.

Notes

- 1 Dinzelsbacher 1993: X–XI (slightly revised in the 2008 edn.: X–XII); 1996; Rosenwein 1998; Boiadjev 2003; Caciola 2003; Dybel 2004; Classen 2005a, 2005b. Surprisingly, the history of mentality has not yet met with much interest in the Anglophone world; but see Ryder 1993; Bernstein 1993. See also Dinzelsbacher 2003; Grabmayer 2004.
- 2 Jackson 1960: 177. He goes further: “The ethic of the Germanic epic rests upon the individual greatness of the hero – to fight bravely and to die without complaint. . . . [T]he code governing individual relationships was strict. There must be unquestioning loyalty to his ruler on the part of the liege man, even if such loyalty involves conduct towards others which would otherwise be mean and treacherous. The often quoted words of Tacitus, that the chief considers it disgraceful to leave the field without victory, the liege man to leave the field without his chief, are reflected in the epics” (177–8). See also the various contributions to the *Nibelungenlied* and the heroic epic by Haug 1989, 1995.
- 3 For recent studies focusing on this topic, see Dobozy 2005; Keyes 2006; Bennett 2006; for the mythical dimension of heroic epics, see Müller 2002: 144–8.
- 4 The number of introductory studies and surveys is legion; see, e.g., Mackensen 1984; Heinzle 1987, 2005; Hoffmann 1992.
- 5 Again I refer here only to some of the latest studies: McConnell 1998; Müller 1998; Gentry et al. 2002; Heinzle et al. 2003; “*Uns ist in alten Mären . . .*” 2003; Fasender 2005; Gallé 2005; Gephart 2005.
- 6 Haymes and Samples 1996; Frakes 1994; Andersson 1987; Ehrismann 1987.
- 7 See the contributions to Ebenbauer and Keller 2006; see also Haymes 1986a. For our purposes, the almost classical studies by Campbell 1956 and Lord 1960 (2000) need to be mentioned only in passing.
- 8 Martin 2002; Badenhausen 2005. For a solid counterpoint, see Ehrismann 2005 (sober and factual); see also Lapp 2005; Hinkel and Diekamp 2004.
- 9 Trans. Hatto 1965: 17. For a historical-critical edition, see Grosse 1997.
- 10 Spiegel 1993; see also various contributions to Kooper 2002, and Dunphy 2003; Classen 2007.

- 11 White 1978: 83 argues: "Histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of *mere* chronicles; and stories in turn are made out of chronicles by an operation which I have elsewhere called 'emplotment.' And by emplotment I mean simply the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures, in precisely the way that Frye has suggested is the case with 'fictions' in general." See also his subsequent thoughts in the same article, 85–6. For the theoretical underpinnings of his concepts of history and fictionality, see the introduction to White 1973: ix–xii, 1–42.
- 12 For a convenient summary of the relevant texts, art objects, and images, see Heinzle 2005: 27–38. For a broader overview, see Andersson 1987.
- 13 Curschmann 1979: 85–119; for a broad summary of the relevant aspects, see Müller 1998: 55–102.
- 14 Classen 1997b, 1999b; see also my critical comments in Classen 1997a; Lienert 1998.
- 15 See the contributions to Classen 2002a; Yamamoto 2000, and the collections of articles in Schrader 1988; Wade and Ehrstine 2004.
- 16 Frakes 1994: 120–6, offers an intriguing, but very speculative interpretation of this scene.
- 17 Bildhauer 2006: 70–6. She argues: "unlike the stories discussed so far, this epic is not about the securing of a spatially bounded body, but about its ensuing disintegration. It thus pessimistically denies the possibility of ever achieving long-term integrity" (70).
- 18 Jaeger 1999: 190 mentions the *Nibelungenlied* only once but demonstrates how central the gender debate was for the entire twelfth century.
- 19 See the contributions to Heinzle, Klein, and Obhof 2003: section "Reformulierungen"; Gentry et al. 2002: Part VI: "The Literary Reception of the Nibelungen Theme in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland," and Part VII: "The Literary Reception of the Nibelungen Theme in Non-German-Speaking Countries."
- 20 For a so far hardly considered aspect of US-American reception history, see Classen 2006c.
- 21 Classen 2001; see also my much more comprehensive analysis of the communication issue in Classen 2002b.
- 22 Whereas Koch 2006 claims that virtually all manifestations of mourning have to be read in light of social performance rituals, Classen 2006d argues that most rituals have to be understood as the bodily language of emotions and that both dimensions have always to be read in conjunction.
- 23 This was the more traditional approach; see, for instance, Ehrismann 1987: 17–35; Breuer and Breuer 1995: 121–96; see also Göhler 1989: 141–63.
- 24 Müller 2002: 144–55, identifies the following points as the key components of the epic: (1) confrontation with the otherworld; (2) destruction of the mythical world; (3) the undermining of the own world by outside forces, hence the alienation of the own existence through the confrontation with the other; (4) the ecstasy of destruction. In 1998: 444–6, Müller suggests that we see here the transformation of the Burgundians, significantly then also called Nibelungs, from a group of warriors into a pack ("Meute") of ferocious killers. "Der Bluttausch allgemeiner Vernichtung breitet sich aus wie eine Epidemie, die auch diejenigen schließlich ergreift, die sich vom Ansteckungsherd fernhalten wollten" (446).
- 25 Dobozy 2005: 221–2. As to the minstrels themselves who perform, or present, the heroic epic, she underlines: "Since the chroniclers, minstrels and poet-singers control the degree of *fama* and prestige the ruler receives, one might say they are actually 'king-makers' because the event itself requires an interpreter to assign it value" (223).
- 26 McConnell 1994: 203, 205. See also Classen 1997a: 223; Green 1994: 83, 86, 161–3.

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Medieval Epic and History in the Romance Literatures

JOSEPH J. DUGGAN

In medieval French, Occitan, and Spanish, as well as in the hybrid language known as Franco-Italian, a popular form of heroic poetry flourished in the high Middle Ages known as the *chanson de geste* or, in Spanish, the *cantar de gesta*. (For convenience, I will refer to all the poems in this genre as *chansons de geste*; the primary meaning of *geste* in this term appears to be “lineage.”) The best known poems in the genre are, in French, the *Chanson de Roland* and, in Spanish, the *Cantar de mio Cid*. The genre is quite extensive: around 120 texts have survived ranging in length from 840 to almost 35,000 lines. Many are poems that began their existence in oral tradition and are heavily marked by formulaic language. They were performed by jongleurs, itinerant entertainers who sang them to the accompaniment of the one-stringed *vielle* and who were also known for other types of performance such as singing saints’ lives and lyric poetry, exhibiting trained animals, performing in mimes, juggling, and acrobatics. For roughly the first century and a half of active scholarship, that is to say up to just after the middle of the twentieth century, the dominant question on which scholars concerned with this genre tended to focus was the relationship between the *chanson de geste* and historical events whose memory was preserved in them.

Without hazarding a history of this scholarship, I would like here to sketch a typology of the genre as concerns its transmission of historical information. The surviving copies of the *chansons de geste* are in manuscripts dating from between the second quarter of the twelfth century and the late fifteenth century.¹

From the point of view of one concerned about references in the poems to identifiable historical characters and events, there are three major categories of *chansons de geste*. The first and most extensive category consists of poems that refer to history of the Carolingian period, that is to say broadly the eighth and ninth centuries. The second category evokes events between the Carolingian period and the twelfth century. The third presents events contemporary with the poems themselves.

For the first type, reflecting events of the Carolingian period, the distance between history and the extant manuscript copies is roughly between 350 and 500 years. Most *chansons de geste* belong to this category. Three of its best known texts are the *Chanson de Roland*, the *Chanson de Guillaume*, and *Girart de Roussillon*.

The Oxford *Chanson de Roland*, earliest of the seven French versions (plus three fragments) of the poem, dates from around 1100, so from shortly after the First Crusade, and has survived in a manuscript from the second quarter of the twelfth century.² The historical basis of the narrative is the defeat of the rearguard of Charlemagne's army as it crossed the Pyrenees from south to north on August 15, 778, thus some 320 years before the earliest extant version and 350 to 375 years before that version was written in the extant copy. We know the date of the event from the epitaph of Eggihard, one of Charlemagne's courtiers who died on that day (Menéndez Pidal 1960: 215). Chronicles of the Carolingian period record the defeat as a great loss, and Einhard in his *Life of Charlemagne* ascribes it to the treachery of the Basques.³ No contemporary source gives the name of the place where the defeat occurred, however, which first surfaces as *Rozaballes* in an eleventh-century Latin summary of a lost early Spanish version of the *Chanson de Roland* (Alonso 1961). This toponym, of Basque origin, appears later, transformed by popular etymology into "Roncevaux," a well known site in the Pyrenees. The identity of the enemy too has been transformed: although at the time of Charlemagne the Basques were a Christian people, Charlemagne's enemies in the poem are portrayed as Saracens, pagans who worship idols named Mahumet, Tervagant, Apollin, and Jupiter. This depiction corresponds to the Christian view of Islam, a violently distorted view, but one that had wide currency in a period in which European intellectuals were only rarely familiar with the tenets of this alien religion.⁴ Several chronicles written in Arabic (texts and translation in Menéndez Pidal 1960: 287–91) record, in fact, the participation of Arab fighters in the historical defeat, in which both Basques and Arabs appear to have taken part. For this aspect, the poem preserves through nearly four centuries the detail of Muslim participation in the battle, omitted by Carolingian historiographers who appear to have wished to avoid embarrassing their patrons by attributing to non-Christians the defeat of the Christian Franks.

That Roland himself, leader of the rearguard of Charlemagne's army in the poem, was a historical figure seems likely. Roland appears in Einhard as the prefect of the march of Brittany who perished in the battle, a once disputed reading whose authenticity has been confirmed.⁵ Two samples of a coin bearing Charlemagne's name on the obverse and Roland's on the reverse have been discovered, but it is not certain that this Roland was the prefect of Brittany (Stiennon 1960: 87–95). In any event, while the *Chanson de Roland* preserves the memory of a great historical defeat of Charlemagne's forces and places it in a plausible location, under the leadership of a military figure, Roland, who is likely historical, the overwhelming majority of the poem's assertions about historical events are fictitious. Among these are ascribing the defeat to a Christian traitor, Ganelon, who is tried and executed in the poem, having the emir of Cairo,⁶ Baligant, intervene with a vast coalition of

pagan forces, and having Roland's betrothed, Alda, die of grief upon hearing that Roland is dead. The historical elements in the *Chanson de Roland* are confined to the reminiscence of a handful of facts.

In its present form, the *Chanson de Guillaume* dates from around 1140 and survives in a single copy from the early thirteenth century. The historical prototype of the poem's hero Guillaume, and the central figure in a cycle of *chansons de geste*, is William, count of Toulouse from 790, grandson of Charles Martel, and cousin of Charlemagne. William's political authority extended as far south as the Catalan territories that the Franks conquered from the Arabs in the last 15 years of the eighth century. He was defeated by the Arabs at an encounter on the river Orbieu near Carcassonne in 793, but only after all his allies had abandoned the field of battle. Ten years later, he was among the victors when Christian forces captured Barcelona. William, who died in 812 at the abbey of Gellone, had retired to the monastery of Aniane toward the end of his life. In the *Chanson de Guillaume* he is given the epithet *al curb nes* "with the aquiline nose." History has left us no particular notice of the historical William of Toulouse's nose, but in a text dated to 835 Saint Paschasius facetiously calls William's son Naso "the Nose," raising the intriguing probability that Guillaume's epithet is based on a facial feature that had been passed on from father to son.⁷ The Guillaume of epic fights a great battle near Barcelona in the *Chanson de Guillaume* and retires to Aniane in another *chanson de geste*, the *Moniage Guillaume*. His wife in the epic is Guibourc, which corresponds to the name of one of William of Toulouse's wives in history, Witburgh. Of the historical William himself, the epic has preserved, aside from the period in which he flourished, little more than reminiscences of his nose, his wife's name, and his associations with Barcelona and Aniane. In the *Chanson de Guillaume*, he suffers a great defeat, likely based on his defeat at the river Orbieu.

In the epic, however, Guillaume's father Aymeri is the lord of Narbonne and one of his brothers is Aimer, a name that corresponds to that of Adhemarus, count of Narbonne, who may have accompanied William in the expedition against Barcelona (Lot 1927: 468–9). This Adhemarus was certainly not the father of William of Toulouse, but beginning in the second half of the eleventh century eight viscounts of Narbonne bore the name Aymericus, suggesting that they considered the epic Aymeri to have been their authentic forebear (Lejeune 1973).

The exploits of the epic Guillaume, his ancestors, his brothers, and his nephews gave rise to a cycle of 24 poems, known as the Cycle of Guillaume or Cycle of Garin de Monglane,⁸ copied in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in cyclical manuscripts which place them in the order of the events that they recount. Scribes and heads of copying workshops composed transitional passages called *incidences* to link the texts together.⁹ The general context of this cycle's events evokes the historical situation of eighth- and ninth-century France. Spain was largely in the hands of Arab and Berber conquerors who had taken over the Iberian peninsula beginning in 711, with the exception of small Christian kingdoms in the north. The Arabs made incursions into France, establishing outposts along the Mediterranean coast and advancing north until they were repelled in 732 between Poitiers and Tours by

Charles Martel. They held Avignon briefly, and Nîmes (recaptured by Peppin in 752), Orange, Narbonne (recaptured in 759), and the Roussillon for longer periods.

Leaders of the Carolingian dynasty, including the mayors of the palace Charles Martel and Peppin the Short (d. 768), and the emperors Charlemagne (c. 742–814) and Louis the Pious (814–40), appear in the *chansons de geste*. Also represented, although sparsely, are the Merovingian kings Clovis (in *Floovant*), Clothar and Dagobert (in *Octavian*), and the Ottonians (in the *Enfances Godefroi* and the *Chevalier au cygne*). Typically the kings and emperors in the epic are engaged in constant struggles with their barons. The role of Guillaume and his kin in the epic is to defend the Carolingians against domestic traitors and Christianity against the Saracens. Guillaume is called “Guillaume d’Orange” in the *chansons de geste*, but although his prototype William of Toulouse did win victories over Muslim forces, he never liberated Orange in particular, despite the claims of the *chanson de geste* known as the *Prise d’Orange*.

The Saracens in the *chansons de geste*, although frequently viewed as Muslims, are actually an amalgam of the non-Christian peoples surrounding Christian Europe. Many of their names, such as “Baligant” and “Deramed,” vaguely recall the phonetic contours of Arab names, but others are Germanic. Witukind the Saxon, for example, appears under the form *Guiteclin*, and Guillaume’s adversary in the *Prise d’Orange* likewise has a Germanic name, *Tedbalt* [=Theobald]. The Saracens are polytheists whose gods are often depicted as idols. Mahomet is the name not of their prophet but of one of these gods. Islam is, of course, a strictly monotheistic faith, but the same cannot be said of the religion practiced by Germanic pagans. Among the Saracen peoples in the *chansons de geste* are the Slavs (*Esclavons*), the Irish (*Irois*), the Persians (*Persant*), the Armenians (*Ermines*), the Almoravids (*Amoraives*), the Scots (*Escoz*), the Greeks (*Grifons*), and the Orkneyans (*Orqueneis*). Quite obviously, there is no historical coherence in the medieval French and Occitan epic to the concept of Saracen, which simply designates loosely a non-Christian. This is not true of the Spanish epic, closer in time to the events it presents, in which Muslims are depicted more realistically as a result of greater familiarity deriving from continuous cultural exchange between Christians and Muslims, commonly referred to as the *convivencia*.

Another poem in the same category of texts reflecting historical events of the Carolingian period is *Girart de Roussillon*, whose oldest and most interesting version dates from the middle of the twelfth century in a manuscript copied in the second half of the thirteenth century.¹⁰ This is a poem of very high quality, composed in a mixed language exhibiting features of both French and Occitan. In the opening scenes, Girart, although he is in love with Elissant, the daughter of the emperor of Constantinople, to whom he is betrothed, defers to king Charles and accepts to marry instead Elissant’s sister, Berthe. In return for this concession he has Charles agree that Girart possesses his lands as a freehold rather than a fief. When Charles reneges on this agreement, war breaks out between Girart and the king, leading to the battle of Valbeton that is halted when God sends a firestorm down to strike the banners of both armies. After a peace of five years, hostilities break out again over an affair of blood vengeance and following a series of defeats Girart is forced to leave

his main stronghold of Roussillon with Berthe, whom he has grown to love. After living in the forest of Ardenne for 22 years, he as a charcoal-maker, she as a seamstress, they return to chivalric society through the intercession of Elissant. Further battles ensue, but in the end the Pope negotiates an accord and Girart and Berthe end their days performing pious works, including founding the church of Mary Magdalene at Vézelay.

The character Girart of Roussillon's historical prototype is Gerardus (819–77), count of Paris and later regent of the kingdom of Provence. In the struggle among Charlemagne's three grandsons, Gerardus sided with Lothar against Charles the Bald and Louis the German. In 846 he accompanied Lothar on an expedition against Muslims who were besieging Rome. Gerardus's wife was named Bertha, corresponding to the name of the poetic Girart's wife Berthe. Although the text calls Girart's adversary Charles Martel exclusively through 95 percent of the poem, the Pope at that point tells him that his true name is Charles the Bald, thus – however awkwardly – preserving the name of the reigning Carolingian monarch contemporary with Gerardus of Provence.¹¹ Other events in the poem recall the historical Gerardus. Girart endows the monastery of Vézelay, as did Gerardus. Like Gerardus, Girart is besieged by Charles the Bald: in 870 Gerardus was forced to leave the city of Vienne with his wife as Girart is forced from Roussillon. Almost all the other events and characters in *Girart de Roussillon* are fictional, however, and even the location of Roussillon, which is definitely not the Roussillon in the Pyrenees, cannot be pinpointed by historians of the epic.

The poets and performers of *chansons de geste* who appropriate people and events of the Carolingian period for their works thus appear to have drawn upon imprecise historical traditions that nonetheless have preserved certain core details for centuries.¹² Since the poems are heavily marked by formulaic language, and since external testimonies point to the existence of oral traditions of epic in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries,¹³ the most reasonable hypothesis is that the poems represent oral poetic traditions that came to be set down in writing. For most of those in the performers' audiences, these poems, however spare and distorted the historical data that they transmitted, were their only access to the events of distant history. In general, they reflect the social institutions and military practices not of the Carolingian period, but of the period in which the extant versions were composed, namely the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries. For example, the technique of attacking with a heavy lance held tightly under the arm as a shock instrument by the knight bolstered in his seat by a raised back saddle bow or "candle" did not develop until the later eleventh century.

In the second category of *chansons de geste* are poems that recall events that took place after the Carolingian age but before the period of their own composition. Aside from one poem, the fourteenth-century *Chanson de Hugues Capet*, which invokes little more than the name of the first Capetian monarch, who ruled from 987, this type is represented in French mainly by poems on the First Crusade.

Two works, both composed in the versification and technique of the *chansons de geste*, recount the capture of Antioch in 1098. The first of these, the *Canso d'Antiocha*,

in Occitan, is only extant in a 714-line fragment. It appears to be based on an earlier text by a certain Gregoria Bechada. Its French counterpart, the *Chanson d'Antioche*, earliest poem of the Cycle of the First Crusade, appears to have been composed within a hundred years of the crusade.¹⁴ It purports to be based on a work of a certain Richard the Pilgrim who would have been an eye-witness to the events. While this is unlikely to have been the case, the *Chanson d'Antioche* does recall historical details of the crusade, such as Bohemond's leadership and the cowardice of Stephan of Blois. Nevertheless, it also contains distortions of history, conflating Count Robert II of Flanders with his father Robert the Frisian, who did not participate in the crusade, having Peter the Hermit come from Armenia rather than Amiens, skipping over important events such as the taking of Iconium, and exaggerating enormously the number of both Christians and Muslims at the siege of Antioch. Both the *Canço d'Antioca* fragment and the *Chanson d'Antioche* place the battle of Antioch on a Friday rather than a Wednesday, contrary to the historical record but in accord with the "vengeance of the Lord" theme which interprets the crusaders' victory as retribution for Christ's death, also on a Friday. The *Chanson d'Antioche* also exaggerates the deeds of knights from Picardy. This should perhaps not surprise, since the poem itself is composed in the Picard dialect. Recent studies have concluded that these heroic poems on the taking of Antioch incorporate a modest amount of eye-witness testimony, some of it perhaps mediated by the influence of chronicle accounts of the First Crusade.

An anecdote in Lambert of Ardres's chronicle of Guines and Ardres (Shopkow 2001) gives us a glimpse of one mechanism that induced performers of *chansons de geste* to modify historical details in the works they were transmitting. A jongleur, says Lambert, was traveling through Picardy performing a version of the *Chanson d'Antioche*. In exchange for incorporating into his poem the exploits of a nobleman, Arnold of Guines, at the siege of Antioch, the jongleur requested a gift of scarlet stockings. When the noble refused to agree to the bargain, the jongleur omitted Arnold's deeds from the performance. Jongleurs, after all, were dependent on the generosity of their audiences for their livelihood, and while the chronicler tells this story with great indignation, the jongleur's point of view is quite understandable. If jongleurs were susceptible to effacing a character from the performance of a poem, they would certainly not have hesitated to enhance a person's achievements, or those of his ancestors, in exchange for economic gain.

The French poems on the First Crusade have only survived in cyclical manuscripts, of which there are 12 for the cycle, including fragments. The other poems of the cycle, including the *Chanson de Jérusalem*, *Les Chétifs*, and 11 other texts, varying in length from 23,000 to 51,000 lines depending on the manuscript, are even less valid as historical testimonies than the *Chanson d'Antioche*. In the *Chanson de Jérusalem*, for example, the city is said to be under the control of the sultan of Persia, whereas it was actually held by the Fatimids of Egypt. Hugues le Maine, Baldwin, and Bohemond are said to take part in the siege of Jerusalem, contrary to the historical record; on the other hand, the poem represents the robber baron Thomas of Marle as a great hero. The *Jérusalem* places the battle of Ascalon at Ramleh.¹⁵ Among the

matters the poems of the cycle recount is the origin of the family of Godefroy of Bouillon (who ruled Jerusalem the year after it was captured), said in the epic to be descended from the Swan Knight. By and large, they follow the techniques and modes of imaginative literature of the period rather than of historiography.

To this second category of poems that tell of historical events that took place shortly before their own time belongs also the *Cantar de mio Cid*, which relates the exploits of the historical Rodrigo of Vivar, a vassal of King Alfonso VI of Castile and León. Rodrigo's deeds were fairly well recorded in the period, providing a sound basis for comparing the poem's claims to the hero's life. The poem preserves a remarkable number of names of contemporaries of Rodrigo, such as the hero Alvar Fáñez, Rodrigo's nephew Alvar Salvadórez, Diego Téllez, and Rodrigo's wife Ximena. Although it does recount – but in only 11 lines – the primary event for which Rodrigo is known in history, the capture of the great city of Valencia in 1094, it seriously distorts events of the late eleventh century both by what it depicts and what it omits. It fails to mention, for example, that Rodrigo's historical wife was the second cousin of King Alfonso VI of Castile, a detail potentially highly relevant to the delicate relationship between hero and king that is portrayed in the poem as it describes Rodrigo's rise from the status of a low-ranking noble to the equivalent of kingship. Also passed over in silence is Rodrigo's service as a mercenary to the Muslim king of Saragossa. Rodrigo's two exiles from Castile in history are compressed into one. The marriages of the Cid's daughters with the heirs of Carrión, and consequently the plot of the final two thirds of the poem, are entirely fictitious, as are the women's alleged second marriages with the heirs of Navarre and Aragon. The *Cantar de mio Cid* manipulates history in such a way as to insult the powerful Castro family of Castile by slandering its forebears, to the advantage of the rival Lara clan, which had married in with a descendant of Rodrigo. This retelling of history provides an important instance of the recasting of an ancestor's achievements for the benefit of his descendants. In exaggerating the hero's rise to power and his acquisition of enormous wealth, the text also served as an encouragement for ambitious fighting men of low status to join the forces that would eventually reverse the damage caused by the disastrous defeat of Christian armies at Alarcos in 1195. This accounts for the poem's emphasis on the acquisition and distribution of booty, far greater than the attention given to economic aspects of warfare in any epics from north of the Pyrenees. The poem was copied in 1207, a date given in the colophon, and the Cid died in 1099, so the *Cantar de mio Cid* is a prime example of the deformations that historical events can undergo in a period of just over a century, in this case under the impetus of political forces.¹⁶

The third category of *chansons de geste* consists of those composed by poets who were contemporaries of the events they recounted.¹⁷ There are only two such poems, but their treatment of events is instructive.

The first is the *Canço de la Crozada*, a poem in Occitan dedicated to recounting events of the Albigensian Crusade in which knights from northern France descended upon southern France to suppress heresies, principally among the Cathars, and in the process attacked nobles and townspeople who were either heretics or sympathized

with their persecuted compatriots (Martin-Chabot 1957–61). The *Canso de la Crozada* consists of two parts, by different authors. The first, the cleric Guilhem de Tudela who knew many of the key figures in the war and was sympathetic with the religious aims of the crusade and thus favorable to the northerners, tells about events that began in 1208. Guilhem wrote under the patronage of two men: Baldwin of Bruniquel, brother of the Count of Toulouse, and a Burgundian crusader knight of rather humble status, William of Contres. Guilhem's part breaks off as he awaits news of the outcome of the battle of Muret in September of 1213. He was an eye-witness to many of the events he recounts. We know much more about Guilhem than about any jongleur because he includes autobiographical details in the text itself, telling us not only that he composed his poem, but that he himself wrote it out. Despite his education and access to learned historiographic models, however, Guilhem asserts that he is emulating the *Canso d'Antiocha* of Gregoria Bechada. He places the Cathars and their allies in the position that the Saracens occupy in the patterned world of the *chanson de geste*, but this black-and-white portrayal is progressively mitigated by his sympathies with fellow Christians on the southern side in the face of horrific events such as the capture of Béziers and the massacre of its inhabitants, Cathar and Christian alike. Guilhem's account of the deeds of his second patron, William of Contres, is reported by no other historical source, leading to the suspicion that Guilhem's version of the patron's participation in battle is either exaggerated or untrue.

After 2,768 lines, Guilhem's poem was carried forward without a break in the narrative by an anonymous continuator, who extended the work to cover events only up to 1219, although he was writing in 1228. In contrast to Guilhem, this second author, thought to be a secular priest in the entourage of the counts of Toulouse, openly expresses strong empathy for the inhabitants of southern France. His patrons were Count Raymond VII of Toulouse and the son of the count of Foix. For him the viscount of Béziers, who died in prison under mysterious circumstances, was a martyr. Bishop Fouque of Toulouse, on the other hand, is for him the Antichrist. He condemns the leader of the northern invaders, Simon of Montfort, as a felon guilty of arson and murder, a man of arrogant pride. He takes joy in depicting the death of Simon, struck on the helmet by a stone launched at him by a woman fighting to repel a siege, an act that undercuts the epic conventions in two ways: the killing is achieved by a woman and one who uses a machine for the purpose. The anonymous continuator has Simon of Monfort fight seven years before his unsuccessful siege of Beaucaire, just as Charlemagne (according to Guilhem de Tudela) fought seven years before taking Carcassonne. After 6,810 lines, the narrative breaks off.

The other text in this category is the Occitan poem *La Guerra de Navarra*, by Guilhem Anelier of Toulouse, composed probably in 1280 and telling of events of the years 1276 and 1277.¹⁸ Guilhem was a dependent of Eustache de Beaumarchais, deputy of the king of France. In contrast to the classic *chansons de geste* and the song on the Albigensian Crusade, the civil war in Navarre does not pit one religious community against another but rather describes the struggle between two political

alliances in a Christian city, Pamplona. Unlike the two poets of the *Canso de la Crozada*, Guilhem Anelier was himself a knight and took an active part in some of the battles he recounts. Like them he exaggerates the numbers of fighters by epic proportions, but his narrative is intimately related to the sequence of actions occurring in the war whose story he is telling. Guilhem Anelier's epic is undoubtedly the closest to the events themselves, which took place within only a few years of his writing. It is thus considered to have genuine value as an historical document, often recording the exact time of events and even the names of the streets on which they took place.

In the poems in all three categories of the genre that I have outlined, the poets' pretense is that they are narrating historical events, whether the texts derive from oral tradition or are written from the start by educated authors. Texts based on events of a period three centuries earlier consist largely of fiction. In those whose composition takes place between a century and a century and a half of the historical events, distortions of history are less pervasive but still visible to a certain degree; they appear to be motivated in large part by the attraction of narrative commonplaces of the genre, such as descent from a legendary or mythical ancestor, although other factors such as the conflation of the actions of two characters who bear the same name, the wish to please a patron, and the desire for material reward through flattery also play a role. Poems of the third category, contemporary with the events they narrate, reveal few such outright distortions, although their authors do not hesitate to favor certain characters and disparage others by interpretive presentation. The epics are, then, historical roughly in inverse proportion to their distance from the historical events they aspire to narrate.

The use of the names Roland and Oliver for brothers, sometimes twins, in documents from around the year 1000 suggests that some versions of what was later called the *Chanson de Roland* existed already that early (Aebischer 1952; summarized in idem 1972: 157–62). Likewise the lineage of Guillaume was the subject of songs from around the same time: a number of characters associated with him in epic figure in a late tenth- or early eleventh-century Latin text known as the "Fragment of the Hague" which exhibits formal characteristics that resemble some of those found in the *chansons de geste* (Aebischer 1967). For *Girart de Roussillon*, René Louis (1946–7) has formulated a theory that would account for some of the poem's peculiarities by assuming a continuous tradition of song going back to the ninth century when Girart's historical prototype lived. This same hypothesis would explain the persistence in other *chansons de geste* of historical details that are unlikely to have come from the written tradition of historiography.

My own view is that, just as the Romance languages descend from Spoken Latin (Vulgar Latin), the medieval epic in those languages descends from Spoken Latin poems. Songs were sung about military leaders in Spoken Latin, but were rarely recorded in writing because the higher strata of society looked down upon the qualities of works that were not composed in the language of the educated. We only have a few fragments of these songs, sung during triumphal processions that were accorded to victorious Roman military leaders. They are referred to in Plutarch's

Life of Aemilius Paullus (34.4), and fragments are incorporated into the *Divus Julius* of Suetonius, who died around 121 CE. The first two of these were composed for triumphs of Caesar returning from Gaul:

Gallias Caesar subegit. Nicomedes Caesarem:
Ecce Caesar nunc triumphat qui subegit Gallias,
Nicomedes non triumphat qui subegit Caesarem.

Gaul was brought to shame by Caesar; by King Nicomedes, he.
Here comes Caesar, wreathed in triumph for his Gallic victory!
Nicomedes wears no laurels, though the greatest of the three.
(Suet. *Div. Jul.* 49; text Rolfe 1951; trans. Graves 1957)

Urbani, servate uxores: moechum calvum adducimus.
Aurum in Gallia effutuisti, hic sumpsisti mutuum.

Home we bring our bald whoremonger; Romans, lock your wives away!
All the bags of gold you lent him went his Gallic tarts to pay.
(*Div. Jul.* 51)

Another song protested foreigners in the Senate:

Gallos Caesar in triumphum ducit, idem in curiam;
Galli bracas deposuerunt, latum clavum sumpserunt.

Caesar led the Gauls in triumph, led them to the senate house;
Then the Gauls put off their breeches, and put on the laticlave.
(*Div. Jul.* 80; text and trans. Rolfe 1951)

All three are in trochaic *septenarius* verses, all exhibit paratactic style, and, to my great initial surprise, all exhibit assonance in their lines, in the sense of agreement in the vowel sounds of the final tonic syllables.¹⁹ A fourth takes Brutus as its object of satire:

Brutus, quia reges eiecit, consul primus factus est;
Hic, quia consules eiecit, rex postremo factus est.

Brutus, because he threw out the kings, became the first consul;
this one, because he threw out the consuls, at last became king.
(*Div. Jul.* 80)

In his *Divus Aurelianus* Flavius Vopiscus records also a children's song in imitation of those sung in triumphs:

Mille, mille, mille decollavimus;
unus homo mille decollavimus.

Mille bibat quisquis mille occidit.
Tantum vini habet nemo quantum fudit sanguinis.

Thousand, thousand, thousand we've beheaded now.
One alone, a thousand we've beheaded now.
He shall drink a thousand who a thousand slew.
So much wine is owned by no one as the blood which he has shed.
(Magie 1979–82: III, 202–3)

Note that lines 1, 2, and 4 of this text are in assonance and line 4 is a trochaic *septenarius*.

The significance of the assonance is that the earliest epic poems in French, including the *Chanson de Roland* in its Oxford version and the *Chanson de Guillaume*, as well as the *Cantar de mio Cid*, are composed in verse paragraphs (*laisses*, *tiradas*) each of which is bound together by assonances linking the final stressed syllable of each line.²⁰ The Christian characters in these poems, however, bear almost exclusively Germanic names derived from Frankish for the French poems and Visigothic names for the Castilian text. Like the fragments of Spoken Latin songs, the *chansons de geste* are songs whose function is to blame – or, presumably, to praise – military leaders. I believe that the medieval epic in the Romance languages derives ultimately from songs that Roman soldiers sang about their leaders and heroes, although such songs do not survive from the early Middle Ages, as is in fact the case with all popular literature in the Romance languages that were developing out of Spoken Latin. As more and more Germanic fighting men were incorporated into Roman armies in the Western empire, and as the command of armies and of regions passed to Frankish and Visigothic leaders, songs would have been composed in proto-Romance idioms about the exploits of these Germanic figures with the aim of inspiring combatants to high levels of heroic conduct.

Notes

- 1 The version of the *Chanson de Roland* in Bodleian Library MS Digby 23, copied in the twelfth century, is the earliest text of a *chanson de geste*. Fifty-nine percent of the manuscripts of *chansons de geste* (including fragments) were copied in the thirteenth century, 25 percent in the fourteenth, and 16 percent in the fifteenth. See Duggan 1983.
- 2 Ian Short in Duggan 2005: I, 19–20 (date of the manuscript) and 39–40 (date of the version). Of the ten texts, three are fragmentary and three others acephalous. On the *Chanson de Roland*, see also the chapter of Bossy, this volume.
- 3 The relevant passage from the *Vita Karoli Magni imperatoris* is quoted in Menéndez Pidal 1960: 527.
- 4 The Koran was not available in a European language until 1143, when the English cleric Robert of Ketton translated it into Latin at the request of Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny.
- 5 Tischler 2001: 78–97. The phrase in the *Life of Charlemagne* is “Hruodlandus Britannici limitis praefectus.”

- 6 Called *Babylone* in the poem and in some other medieval texts.
- 7 Lot 1927: 462 n. The text is the *Epitaphium Arsenii*, a biography of Abbot Wala of Corbie.
- 8 In rough order of the occurrences that they narrate, the poems are: *Les Enfances Garin*, *Garin de Monglane*, *Girart de Vienne*, *Aymeri de Narbonne*, *Les Narbonnais*, *Guibert d'Andrenas*, *La Prise de Cordres et de Seville*, *Le Siège de Barbastre* (revised by Adenet le Roi as *Buevon de Conmarchis*), *La Mort Aymeri de Narbonne*, *Les Enfances Guillaume*, *Le Couronnement de Louis*, *Le Charroi de Nîmes*, *La Prise d'Orange*, *Les Enfances Vivien*, *La Chevalerie Vivien*, *Aliscans*, *La Bataille Loquifer*, *Foucon de Candie*, *Le Moniage Rainouart*, *Renier*, *Le Moniage Guillaume*, and *Galien le Restoré*. The *Chanson de Guillaume* combines events found in *La Chevalerie Vivien* and *Aliscans*. Garin de Monglane is the ancestor of Guillaume's kin group whom the poets place at the head of the lineage.
- 9 This phenomenon is treated in Tyssens 1967: 178. On *incidences*, see Delbouille 1927, 1960.
- 10 Oxford, Bodleian Library, Canonici 63.
- 11 The principal critical work on both the historical Gerardus and the poetic Girart is Louis 1946–7; see also the critique by Lot 1958.
- 12 Further analysis of the relationship between history and the Romance epic is found in Duggan 1986.
- 13 For the external evidence, see Duggan 1980–1.
- 14 Two modern editions take different manuscripts as their base texts: Duparc-Quioc 1977–8; Nelson 2003.
- 15 For these and other deviations from history, see Duparc-Quioc 1955: 18–30.
- 16 See Lacarra 1980; Duggan 1989 (2008), and Vaquero (this volume).
- 17 On both the historical works concerning the Albigensian Crusade and the song on the civil war in Navarre (treated below), see Struss 1980.
- 18 Michel 1856. Berthe et al. 1995 offer an edition including a color facsimile of the unique manuscript, the edited texts, translations into Spanish and Basque, and two studies.
- 19 Other trochaic *septenarii* are extant in Suetonius, but it is impossible to tell whether they were in sequences linked by assonance since each consists only of a single line. See *Caligula* 6; *Galba* 6 in Rolfe 1951.
- 20 For a more detailed argument on the role of Spoken Latin poetry in the development of poetry in the Romance languages, see Duggan 2001.

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Roland's Migration from Anglo-Norman Epic to Royal French Chronicle History

MICHEL-ANDRÉ BOSSY

The historicity of French medieval epics – called *chansons de geste* – can be considered in three separate ways. One can focus on the relations of the *chansons* to the past events that they commemorate, or on the historical circumstances in which they were created, or finally on their various intrusions into later historiography. These three approaches may conveniently be labeled “sources,” “remains,” and “aftereffects.” Taking the “sources” option means seeking out the historical antecedents embalmed in the epics. In this approach, the *chansons de geste* are shown to preserve and refashion legends distilled from a jumble of collective historical memories. This vein of scholarship, mined by many generations of scholars, may be likened to euhemerism, since it presumes that historical antecedents can be found within almost any *chanson de geste*. The epic cycles organized around such figures as Charlemagne and William of Orange focus their plots on battles fought by those heroes three or four hundred years earlier (Menéndez Pidal 1960; Lafont 1991a and 1991b: 9–39; Frappier 1955–83: I, 64–87). Yet other cycles commemorate events of much more recent date: in the Crusade Cycle, for example, the *Chanson d'Antioche* and the *Chanson de Jérusalem* relate the conquest of those cities less than a century or so earlier, during the first crusade (1098–9).

The “remains” approach to the *chansons de geste* concentrates on how they bring into play historical factors from their own time of composition and performance. There are instances of *chansons* that take the immediate present as their subject: for example, the Occitan *Canso de la Crozada* (*Song of the Albigensian Crusade*), composed between 1210 and 1219, reports political events and battles that are unfolding during that very time. While most *chansons* locate their plots at a greater temporal distance, they do afford many glimpses of the society within which their poets and jongleurs (or minstrels) practiced their art (Rychner 1955: 1–67; Duggan 1986). These epics divulge the aspirations and anxieties of the listeners

for whom they were intended. Their disclosures are unmistakable, often verging on obsession.

The third way of relating the *chansons de geste* to history (the “aftereffects” approach) assesses the influences that they exerted on successive historiographers. From epic poems that had been performed before audiences prose chroniclers gleaned accounts of the past that they absorbed into their own narrative designs (Page 1989: 32–3, 216). Prompted by their noble or royal patrons, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century chroniclers set their sights on portraying the past in a more sober and plausible manner than did the *chansons*. Yet as he compiled his history, a chronicler had to make room for cherished epic heroes, especially heroes whom his patrons claimed as ancestors. Eager to please his protectors, the chronicler appropriated lore from the *chansons de geste*. He did not borrow everything: he made a selection of what to keep, what to discard, and what to refashion. Once his chronicle was complete, other historiographers would follow in his footsteps and replicate his epic borrowings and imaginative adaptations as unimpeachable facts.

* * *

Indirect evidence reveals that the legend of Roland migrated during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries from orally performed epic verse to prose chronicle histories, which were first redacted in Latin, then later in vernacular French.¹ We can follow that evolution with relative ease along the trails of extant manuscripts. Guessing the *Chanson de Roland*’s oral antecedents is a much harder task (Riquer 1959). We lack any hard evidence as to how memories of Charlemagne’s Spanish campaign in the year 778 might have been orally transmitted for over three centuries, until reshaped into the oldest preserved version of the *Chanson de Roland*, the “Oxford” manuscript (Taylor 2001: 28–41). In 1865 Gaston Paris famously conjectured that survivors from the ambush against Charlemagne’s rearguard in the Pyrenees had voiced their grief in ballads (*cantilènes*) that later grew into popular heroic narratives.² That oral tradition seemingly preserved the memory of a grave defeat that Carolingian historiographers, for their part, took pains to cover up in the *Annals of the Kingdom of the Franks* (*Annales regni Francorum*), the Limousin Astronomer’s *Life of Louis the Pious* (*Vita Hludowici imperatoris*), and other annals (Menéndez Pidal 1960: 521–31; Gicquel 2003: 17–37). The historiographers’ embarrassment about the 778 ambush would explain why for over 50 years Roland’s death and even his name left no written trace – the first mention crops up in Eginhard’s *Life of Charlemagne* (*Vita Karoli*, c. 835).

Gaston Paris’s thesis of a centuries-old oral tradition found many disciples and was later refined by Martín de Riquer and Ramón Menéndez Pidal. The “traditionalist” camp met opposition from Joseph Bédier, who argued that the Roland legend took shape in monastic *scriptoria* and abbeys along pilgrimage routes to Compostela. He also stressed the Oxford *Roland*’s huge artistic superiority over its Latin analogues, such as the *Nota Emilianense* (c. 1075), the even older “Hague fragment,” and other traces of a tenth-century *Gesta Francorum* (Riquer 1957: 27–73; Menéndez Pidal 1960: 372–447; Gicquel 2003: 38–43, 58–65). The “individualist” thesis of Bédier

and his followers, on the other hand, envisioned the Oxford *Roland* as a monumental work composed by a single master-poet, Turolde, whose name stands out in the poem's final line. Bédier's influence remained alive in the work of later scholars – including, for example, Italo Siciliano, Paul Aebischer, and André Burger.

The roots of the Roland legend in eighth- to twelfth-century military and secular court history, rather skeptically surveyed by Bédier, received further attention from scholars like Prosper Boissonade (1923), Ferdinand Lot (1948, 1958), Ramón Menéndez Pidal (1960: 182–330), Hans-Erich Keller (1989), and Robert Lafont (1991a; 1991b: 9–12), among others. By delving into both epic “sources” and “remnants” this line of research has pinpointed the Roland legend's geographical references and historical allusions, in conjunction with Arabic sources (Menéndez Pidal 1960: 208, 519–21). The findings disclose a chronological jumble, in which historical characters and events from separate periods become blithely intermingled. If we investigate the cast of characters, for example, we discover that Roland's companion-at-arms, Archbishop Turpin, derives his name from the eighth-century Archbishop Tilpin of Reims, while the traitor Ganelon derives from Archbishop Wenilo of Sens, who defied Charles the Bald in 859 (Holmes 1955: 87; Menéndez Pidal 1960: 323–4). Among those who assist the *chanson*'s Charlemagne in defeating Baligant are avatars of powerful Carolingian and Capetian lords. *Oger de Danemarche* harks back to Duke Autcharius, who in 771–4 strongly resisted Charlemagne's drive to disinherit his own nephews (Lot 1948: 306, 319–20, 391; Menéndez Pidal 1960: 416–19). *Richart le Veill, sire des Normans* stands for Richard I the Fearless, duke of Normandy (d. 996), grandfather of William the Conqueror (Keller 1989: 50). *Gefreid d'Anjou* is Geoffrey I Grey mantle, who helped Hugues Capet to seize the crown in 987, and his “frere” *Tierri, duc d'Argonne*, Charlemagne's champion against Pinabel, is probably his brother-in-law, Thierry, count of Flanders (Keller 1989: 43–4, 83–4). Finally, *Tedbald de Reins* calls to mind Thibaut II, count of Champagne (d. 1152), who once waged a two-year war against his overlord, Louis VII (Keller 1989: 44–5). In short, the poem's roster of names refers to several periods of history and freely conflates them.

Scour the archives as one may, one historical enigma remains unsolved: the ethnic identity of the warriors who ambushed Charlemagne's rearguard in 778. Were they Christian Basques? Or Basques fighting side by side with Muslims? Or another group entirely, namely, Occitan-speaking Gascons led by Duke Lupus II? The question remains open, though each of the three hypotheses has its defenders.³

Moreover, the Roland legend may have tapped into reminiscences of a much earlier ambush in the Soule region of the Western Pyrenees: in 637 a contingent of Frank warriors led by Duke Arnebert perished there, after being sent by King Dagobert I to put down a Basque rebellion (Ohly 1971; Lot 1948: 94–5). The legend is also draws on memories of a military disaster – probably more severe than the 778 ambush – that befell the Franks in 824, under the reign of Charlemagne's son, Louis the Pious. Having attacked the Basques of Pamplona and the Banu Qasi in the Ebro region, Louis's army suffered a crushing defeat: its two leaders were captured and one of them (Count Ebles) was sent as a gift to the emir of Córdoba (Lot 1948: 372; Lewis

1965: 45; Collins 1995: 247). The 824 debacle ended Carolingian control over the march of Navarre.

Moving forward in time, the Oxford *Roland* also absorbs features of eleventh-century Iberian politics and warfare. It appears to glean incidents and details from the reign of Alfonso VI the Brave of Leon and Castile, who in 1077 proclaimed himself “imperator totius Hispaniae” and who styled his image in imitation of Charlemagne. For instance, the camels and drums owned by the Saracens in the *Chanson* hark back to the battle of al-Zallāqah or Badajoz (1086), where they were first deployed with great effect by the Almoravids, newly arrived from north Africa to wage war on Alfonso VI (Riquer 1957: 75–6). That defeat gravely diminished Alfonso’s sway over the Muslim *tā’ifa* kings, from whom he used to levy enormous tributes (*paria* payments), to which the *Chanson* clearly alludes in its catalogue of munificent gifts borne by camels that King Marsile of Saragossa offers to his besieger, Charlemagne (stanzas 3, 13, 51; Kinoshita 2006: 17–24). Thus, according to André de Mandach, the Roland legend reshaped itself in northern Spain during the 1090s in such a way that Charlemagne became conflated with Alfonso VI and Roland with Sancho Ramírez, king of Aragon and Navarre, slain in 1094 while besieging Muslim-held Huesca (Mandach 1961: 33–52, 71). The traitor Ganelon, for his part, took on attributes of García Ordóñez Granionis, reviled for having betrayed the Christian side before the battle of Alcaraz, which Sancho Ramírez’s son, Pedro I, won in 1096 (Mandach 1961: 67–8). More convincing perhaps than these specific conjectures is the general connection between the crusading ethos of the *Chanson de Roland* and the zeal of knights who crossed the Pyrenees in order to participate in the Iberian *reconquista*.⁴

* * *

Having thus surveyed the “sources” and “remnants” of the Roland legend, our focus may now shift to its “aftereffects.” This third way of connecting the *chansons de geste* to history relinquishes conjectures about vanished oral traditions in order to concentrate on questions of written transmission. By following that road, several modern scholars have been able to trace Roland’s mutations from chronicle to chronicle. André de Mandach, Ronald Walpole, and Gabrielle Spiegel, among others, have demonstrated how the legend of Roland’s death and the two battles of Roncevaux were transmitted and adapted through a series of Latin and French chronicles (Mandach 1961; Walpole 1976 and 1985; Spiegel 1986 and 1993: 69–98). That approach has, however, been less fully applied to the epic corpus. French versions of the *Chanson de Roland* have come down to us in seven manuscripts, whose interrelations are rather complex (Lafont 1991a: II, 149–58; Horrent 1951). Further interpretive work deserves to be done on the literary and cultural particularities of each extant manuscript.

The *Roland* codex, the famous Digby MS 23 of Oxford’s Bodleian Library, offers a version of the *Roland* that dates from the late eleventh century, in an Anglo-Norman manuscript of around 1170.⁵ There is virtual unanimity among scholars that the Oxford *Roland* aesthetically surpasses every other known *chanson de geste*.⁶

Its modern critical fame enables that unique text to eclipse, in particular, the other six versions of the *Chanson de Roland*,⁷ one of which, known as V4, was composed in northern Italy. This Italian *Roland* heralds a rich Franco-Italian narrative tradition that includes the *Entrée d'Espagne*, a mid-fourteenth-century "prequel" to the *Chanson de Roland*. (Much later, fully Italian avatars include Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato* in 1483 and Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* in 1516.) The migration of Roland over the Alps into rhymed epics (Krauss 1980) and over the Pyrenees into Catalan and Castilian narratives (Horrent 1951: 447–534) were significant literary transfers from one culture to another. Alongside these transfers, the Roland legend underwent another type of relocation when writers in northern France and Flanders transposed it from epic verse into prose chronicle form. In those regions, a growing number of thirteenth- to fourteenth-century patrons and readers wished for prose remakes of narrative poetry (Doutrepont 1939).

The evolution from epic verse to chronicle requires a wide-angle view beyond the Oxford *Roland*. Modern veneration of the Oxford text's grandeur and antiquity not only leaves the later French verse *Rolands* in the shadow, it causes us to lose sight also of the much broader textual dissemination that the Roland legend received in the form of prose chronicles. Such one-sidedness is unfortunate since, as Stephen G. Nichols points out, the successive reinterpretations of the Roland legend in verse and prose reveal a "continually evolving idea" of what happened at Roncevaux and why it must matter for the audience: instead of attempting "to present the past event in and for itself," each poem and chronicle records "the way in which its author and his contemporaries viewed the past" (Nichols 1969: 52–3, 77). Each Roland text adapts its source materials to a fresh historical context and cultural sensibility, which it illustrates. The sequence of recast texts thus enables us to observe a "dynamic exchange from literature to life and back to literature" (53).

The most often reproduced and translated prose paradigm of the Roland legend was the Latin pseudo-chronicle ascribed to Archbishop Turpin. Its longer title is *Historia de vita Caroli Magni et Rolandi*, but it also goes by the nickname of *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*. It has come down to us in over 300 Latin manuscripts and a vast number of translations in vernacular languages (Mandach 1961–93: I, 364–98; Kostka 2005: 41–4). In French alone it gave rise to seven independent translations during the first three decades of the thirteenth century: one was by an Anglo-Norman writer, William de Briane, and the other six by writers working for aristocratic patrons in Flanders (Spiegel 1993: 70–6).

In its Latin form, the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* was embraced by clergy in charge of churches and abbeys along the pilgrimage routes leading to the shrine of Santiago de Compostela (Bédier 1908–13: I–II). Some ascribe its authorship to Aimeri Picaud, compiler of the *Codex Calixtinus* (aka *Liber Sancti Iacobi*, c. 1160), a pilgrim's guide to Santiago de Compostela, rather than to the chroniclers of the kings of France, the monks of the royal abbey of Saint-Denis (Moisan 1985; Burger 1977: 88–93).⁸ Eleventh-century Capetian kings may have been wary of the Roland legend: that saga might obliquely remind everyone that Hugues Capet had disinherited Charlemagne's direct descendants when he seized the French crown in 987. It is no

accident that the earliest versions of both the *Chanson de Roland* (Oxford, Digby MS 23) and the *Chanson de Guillaume* (British Library, Additional MS 38663) hail from Anglo-Norman lands and not from the Ile-de-France.⁹ Around 1100, as Robert Lafont points out, the Roland legend was most popular in the lands north of the Pyrenees that played a significant role in the Spanish *reconquista*: Normandy, Aquitaine, and Burgundy (Lafont 1991a; 1991b: 12–25). The royal French domain in Ile-de-France was not one of those lands.¹⁰

It was the French-speaking aristocracy of Flanders who commissioned and assiduously collected translations of the *Pseudo-Turpin* in the early thirteenth century. Lords “in the orbit of the count of Flanders,” who in earlier days had satisfied their curiosity about the past by listening to “chanted verse histories and *chansons de geste*,” now gave their preference to the prose narrative of the *Pseudo-Turpin* (Spiegel 1986: 207). This “decisive evolution in the historical tastes of the lay aristocracy” launched “the creation of vernacular prose historiography,” a genre to which the Capetian monarchy gave its nod of approval a half century later, when Louis IX asked Primat of Saint-Denis to compile a vernacular *Roman des rois*, a work that Primat completed in 1274 and dedicated to the new king, Philip III (Guenée 1986: 191).

Gabrielle Spiegel argues that two principal concerns drew the Franco-Flemish lords to their translation enterprise. First, they wanted to showcase their genealogical descent from Charlemagne and his imperial entourage. To that end the *Pseudo-Turpin* was a useful document: this Latin chronicle could be seen as “grounding [their] aristocratic ideology in a particularized memory of an ancestral past” (Spiegel 1993: 93). Such textual memory could underwrite “the aristocracy’s claim to greatness and autonomy,” in the face of growing Capetian royal power that challenged their social domination. Secondly, the Franco-Flemish patrons were looking for accounts of the past that would carry more weight than did epic verse. By the end of the twelfth century, the *chansons de geste* were being perceived by some as more entertainment than truth. The authority of verse was shrinking somewhat, while prose saw its fortunes rise as a medium of truth and certainty. Verse works were now more likely to be identified with fiction, while prose seemed the vehicle of factual, certifiable knowledge. In fact, poets at work on new *chansons de geste* or the revision of old ones occasionally borrowed motifs and plot elements from prose chronicle (Kostka 2005: 44–54). By echoing features of the *Pseudo-Turpin* poets found a way to bolster the authority of their verse creations. One writer, Jean d’Outremeuse, managed to celebrate the history of his city, Liège, simultaneously in a *chanson de geste* and a prose chronicle (Thiry 2005). The cultural shift favoring prose was more of a threat to the jongleurs who recited *chansons* than to the writers. Sometimes, as we will see, jongleurs were obliged to acknowledge epic poetry’s diminution of stature.

Under Louis VII the Capetian House had begun to adopt the Roland legend into its own dynastic lore (Keller 1989: 77–92). The trend increased under Louis IX and Philip III. (As if imitating Charlemagne, Philip III led an expedition into Spain, the disastrous “Aragonese Crusade” of 1284–5.) In his *Roman des rois*, Primat points out that Philip-Augustus had married (in 1180) a descendant of Charlemagne,

Isabelle de Hainault. Their son, Louis VIII, had thereby reestablished Charlemagne's lineage on the throne of France: "li vaillanz rois Loys [VIII] fu du lignage le grant Challemaine, et fu en li recovré la lignie" (cited in Guenée 1986: 192). During nearly two centuries the abbey of Saint-Denis pursued Primat's initial work. The result was a great compendium, always carried out under royal patronage: *Les Grandes Chroniques de France*. Those vernacular royal chronicles fully adopt the *Pseudo-Turpin*, adding to it moral commentaries and new details to embellish the fame of both the royalty and the abbey of Saint-Denis. For example, whereas the *Pseudo-Turpin* showed Charlemagne being boosted to heaven by Saint James, the *Grandes Chroniques* tell us that Saint Denis teamed up with James: to offset the scales of justice that devils were loading up with weights, the two beheaded martyrs added huge stone blocks to the other basket (Mortier 1940–4: III, 89).

The stark contrast between the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* and the *Chanson de Roland* (especially in the Oxford version) is pointed out by Jules Horrent (1951: 336–42). He passes in review all of the *Pseudo-Turpin*'s aesthetic shortcomings:

No more mission by Blancandrin! No more double battle: against Marsile and against Baligant! No more violent quarrels between Ganelon and Roland or between Roland and Oliver! No more long and detailed one-on-one combats! The *Pseudo-Turpin* generalizes the tale and summarizes it with no small clumsiness. (336)

Horrent frowns in particular at the *Pseudo-Turpin*'s treatment of Roland's death scene and its insertion of two eye-witnesses who survive to tell the story.¹¹

The *Chanson de Roland*, let it be noted, left no living witness on the battlefield. The absence of any survivor accentuates the miraculous transmission of the historical report: God bestows a vision of the faraway battle to Saint Giles, who is at prayer in the northern French town of Laon. The *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* redirects that same vision to another individual: to wit, the narrator himself, Archbishop Turpin. In the *Chanson de Roland* he is a warrior-priest who fights and dies alongside Roland. The *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* and the *Grandes Chroniques de France* remove him entirely from the battle at Roncevaux and transform him into an author who pens a first-person narrative, which is the very text of the chronicle.

The chronicle's Turpin no longer brandishes a sword, but instead now wields an inventive pen. From the sidelines he offers commentaries that adapt parts of the story into moral exempla. His commentaries, for the most part, reduce epic grandeur to pedestrian sermonizing. Here is an illustration: Why, asks the *Pseudo-Turpin* narrator, did God allow so many Franks to perish as martyrs at Roncevaux?¹² The explanation that he straightaway produces is that, in fact, they all deserved punishment on account of having become drunk and fornicated with Saracen slave-girls whom the wily enemy, King Marsile, had sent to their camp in the care of Ganelon.¹³ So, concludes the narrator, their deaths were deserved and yet, he adds, God mercifully granted them the reward of martyrdom. The *Pseudo-Turpin* insists on sacrificial suffering – for instance, its version of Oliver's death is not that he falls in combat (as in the *chanson*) but rather that he is captured, staked to the ground at each limb, and skinned alive.

By pinning the blame for the massacre on the entire rearguard, *Pseudo-Turpin* draws a veil on Roland's responsibility for the enormous loss of lives suffered by the Franks. He passes over Roland's hubris, which holds such a central place in the *Chanson de Roland*. The *Pseudo-Turpin* reduces divine justice to a run-of-the-mill homily about banal sins. What falls by the wayside is the *Chanson de Roland*'s epic theodicy: its implicit revelation that Roland commits a providential sin – a *felix culpa* – when he foolishly refuses to sound the horn at Roncevaux in order to summon Charlemagne to the rescue. Roland's sin of hubris dooms the rearguard to massacre; yet that sin had to happen in order to bring the retreating Franks back into Spain, where they triumph over their pagan foes.

As it tones down the hyperboles of epic, the *Pseudo-Turpin* also corrects one of the *chanson*'s egregious historical inaccuracies. The *chanson* portrays the Saracens as polytheistic pagans who worship three gods, which it calls "Mahumet," "Apollin," and "Tervagan." The *Pseudo-Turpin*, in contrast, allows its Saracen characters to declare their monotheism in debates with Christians. In one dialogue between the African king Agolant and Charlemagne, the former is even shown to score a point against Charlemagne by pointing out that the emperor does not practice what he preaches: Charlemagne has told him that he looks upon the poor as the messengers of God, yet he lets them sit outside his tent in misery, reserving his gifts of rich food and clothing for the clergy (*Johannes Trans.* 148; *Grandes Chroniques* III: 35). Then as an endorsement of Agolant's censure, the *Grandes Chroniques* paraphrases the scriptural passage on Jesus's words at the Last Judgment to the wicked and the good (Matthew 25: 35–40).

In some ways, then, the *Pseudo-Turpin* and the *Grandes Chroniques* do make efforts in the direction of historical plausibility. They try to pare away entertaining fictions in order to construct an account of the past that fits harmoniously with biblical teachings. For them the Bible is the paradigm of historical veracity. The narratives conveyed by oral tradition and recited by jongleurs are, on the contrary, fraught with minstrel fantasies. The contrast between the truths of written narrative (*exempla*) and the fibs of oral storytelling (*fabulae*) is taken up by the very narrators of the *chansons de geste*. These narrators generally purport to be jongleurs but may in fact be scribes in disguise, since what we meet in the manuscripts are edited transcriptions of oral performances or, in many cases, contrived simulations of performances.

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Scholars have long debated whether the *chansons de geste* were primarily tales crafted orally by jongleurs or poems written by clerics (e.g., Bédier 1908–13; Rychner 1955; Duggan 1988; Taylor 2001: 36–41, 53–65). Were the jongleurs who performed the *chansons* skilled in ancient bardic methods of oral formulaic composition or were they popular entertainers instructed by monks to memorize and recite verse legends? Such legends could have been designed to boost the fame of certain religious shrines or certain reigning dynasties. Conversely, the jongleurs themselves might have improvised connections between their *chansons* and potential patrons, within ruling houses as well as the Church. In short, who really had charge of the epic enterprise? The jongleurs or the scribes? The narrator of *La mort Aymeri de Narbonne* (c. 1175) tells us that

Nus hom ne puet chançon de jete dire
 Que il ne mente la ou li vers define,
 As mos drecier et a tailler la rime
 Ce est bien voirs, gramaire le devise.

No one is able to recite a *chanson de geste*
 without lying at the place where the verse ends,
 to order the words and shape the rhymes
 That is the very truth, as Grammar teaches us.
 (lines 3055–9, trans. Spiegel 1993: 61)

This narrator, if he is not a scribe in disguise, must then be a thoroughly indoctrinated jongleur.

It is worth observing that the term epic never occurs in medieval texts. The heroic verse legends of the Middle Ages that have come down to us in early French manuscripts never refer to themselves as epics but instead as *chansons* that pertain to *gestes*. Only in the sixteenth century did the French language acquire the adjective *épique* and the noun *épopée*. The concept of *geste* had to suffice for many centuries. Its Latin antecedent, the plural past participle *gesta*, refers to things accomplished, to deeds performed. The plural Latin term became in Old French a singular noun denoting first the deeds of ancestors and eventually simply their lineage itself or, as it were, their clan. The oldest version of the *Chanson de Roland* (Digby MS 23) solemnly invokes the “Geste Francor” as the authoritative source of what it relates. So does *La Mort Aymeri de Narbonne*, a rather bookish *chanson*, as we have seen (lines 3062, 3073; cf. 2565, 3081). Other *chansons* use the term more simply as a synonym for “lineage,” “clan,” or “race.”¹⁴

When the *Roland*’s poet speaks of “Geste Francor” is he thinking of a source that is oral or, on the contrary, written? Sometimes he seems to have only an oral tradition in mind. Roland’s pep talk to his companions points in that direction:

Or quart chascuns que granz colps i empleit,
 Que malvaise cançon de nus chantet ne seit!

Let each man see to it here that he strikes great blows,
 so that no bad song will be sung about us!
 (lines 1013–14)

Charlemagne’s arch-enemy, Baligant, has heard the good songs sung about the emperor:

Dist Baligant: “Oil, car mult est proz.
 En plusurs gestes de lui sunt granz honurs.”

Said Baligant: “Oh yes, Charles is very brave,
 several *gestes* greatly honor him.”
 (lines 3180–1)

“May God strike me if I turn untrue to my *geste*!” exclaims Roland as he spurns Charlemagne’s offer of additional troops:

Ço dit li quens: “Jo n’en ferai nient;
Deus me cunfunde, se la geste en desment!”

The count said then: “I will do nothing of the kind;
May God strike me down if I belie the *geste*!”
(lines 787–8)

In this passage the term *geste* takes on the connotation of lineage, and that will be the principal meaning of *geste* in all the other French epic poems.¹⁵

In other passages, the Oxford *Roland* lays claim to a written source: “Il est escrit en la Geste Francor . . .” (line 1443), “Il est escrit en l’anciene geste . . .” (line 3742). The poet acts as the story’s mouthpiece, while at the same time he asserts that parchment documents underwrite its truth:

Il est escrit es cartres e es brefs,
Ço dit la Geste [. . .]

It is written in charters, in documents,
the Geste says so . . .
(lines 1684–5, trans. Goldin 1978: 100)

The poet mediates between writing and orality, as he relates what took place at the battle of Roncevaux:

Ço dit la Geste e cil ki el camp fut:
Li ber Gilie, por qui Deus fait vertuz,
E fist la chartre el mustier de Loüm.
Ki tant ne set ne l’ad prod entendut.

So says the Geste, and so says one who was there, on that field,
the baron Saint Giles, for whom God performs miracles,
who made the charter setting forth these great things in the Church of Laon.
Now any man who does not know this much understands nothing.
(lines 2095–8, translation adapted from Goldin 1978: 112)

The allusion here is to a miraculous vision that enabled Giles in northern France to watch Roland and his companions perishing heroically in the Pyrenees.¹⁶ Since in this version of Roland’s last stand no Christian remains alive on the battlefield, the poet wishes to forestall possible doubts about the historical veracity of his tale. The saint’s miraculous vision renders more plausible the poet’s omniscient knowledge of all that happened and was said at Roncevaux. Moreover, the Saint Giles reference lets listeners know that the poet of the Digby manuscript is retelling a twin-authored

story: he is reciting at one and the same time what the *geste* says and what Saint Giles wrote in his vision testimony.

In short, the earliest known *chanson de geste* seeks to trace its evidence back to a written document. Other epics, however, frown on the medium of writing. For example, in his preamble to *La Prise d'Orange* (c. 1165), the jongleur belittles book learning. He is the best authority on where to find the relics of William of Orange and his nephew Bertrand:

Ge ne cuit mie que ja clers m'en desdie
Ne escripture qu' en ait trové en livre.

I think that no clerk will contradict me,
nor any writing that's found in a book.
(lines 11–12, trans. Ferrante 1974: 141)

The belittling of writers is a defensive tactic on the part of oral performers who are competing with two kinds of literate rivals: some are clerks who cater to pilgrims with the aid of guide books such as Aymeric Picaud's *Liber sancti Jacobi*,¹⁷ and the others are clerks who secure patronage by means of chivalric romances, which they compose and read aloud in various courts. By the fourteenth century, a *chansons de geste*'s narrator is likely to cross over to the other camp and present himself as a writer. Thus, the narrator of the *Enfances Garin de Monglane* coyly presages a secret that he will fully expose later in his "livre joly" (line 1371).

Nevertheless, most *chansons de geste* depict themselves as orally performed poems, and their narrators frequently initiate call-and-response dialogues with the audience, much in the manner of comical characters in a mystery pageant or morality play. Here, for instance, are the opening lines of the second oldest *chanson de geste*:

Plaist vus oïr de granz batailles e de forz esturs,
De Deramed, uns reis sarazinurs,
Cun il prist guere vers Lowis nostre empereur?

Would it please you to hear of great battles and mighty combats,
of how the Saracen King Deramed
launched a war against our emperor Louis?
(*Chanson de Guillaume*, lines 1–3)

The formula of "would you like to hear" reappears in many *chansons*:

Seignor baron, pleroit vos d' une exemple
D' une chançon bien fete et avenante?

My noble lords, would you like an exemplary tale,
a *chanson de geste* that is well composed and pleasing?
(*Couronnement de Louis*, laisse 1)

Oëz, seignor, franc chevalier honeste!
 Plest vos oïr chançon de bone geste:
 Si comme Orenge brisa li cuens Guillelmes?
 Prist a moillier dame Orable la saige;
 Cele fu feme le roi Tiebaut de Perse.

Hear me, my lords, noble knights and worthy,
 if it please you to hear a good deed sung,
 how Count William took and destroyed Orange
 and took to wife the wise Lady Orable,
 who had been Tiebaut of Persia's queen.
 (*Prise d'Orange*, laisse 2, trans. Ferrante 1974: 142)

A *chanson de geste* transcribed around 1160 offers an even folksier invitation:

Canchon de fiere estoire plairoit vos a oïr?
 Laissiés le noise ester, si vos traîés vers mi.

Wouldn't you like to hear a *chanson* that tells a great story?
 So get away from the din and come closer to me.
 (*Aiol*, lines 5–6)

By shouting that question in a noisy fairground or festive hall, the jongleur gathers a circle of listeners around him. In *Huon de Bordeaux*, the jongleur interrupts his tale after close to 5,000 lines, in order to ask for his reward – he is angling for both drink and money – and to announce the next day's installment of the *chanson*:

Pres est de vespre, et je sui moult lassé.
 Or vous proi tous, si cier com vous m'avés
 Ni Auberon ne Huon le membré
 Vous revenés demain après disner;
 Et s'alons boire, car je l'ai désiré [. . .]
 Et si vous proi cascuns m'ait aporté
 Un pan de sa chemise une maille noué.

It's close to vespers and I am very weary.
 Therefore I entreat you all, if you hold me dear
 and also love Auberon and Huon,
 to return here tomorrow after dinner;
 and now let's go drinking for that's what I crave [. . .]
 And I also beg each of you to bring me then a farthing
 tucked away in your shirt knot.

(lines 4976–81)

The fairy king Auberon, a character later borrowed by such writers as Spenser, Shakespeare, and Wieland, steers this *chanson* into a fantasy world, rich in marvels and surprises.

The sustained tone of high seriousness that the Oxford *Roland* maintains from start to finish distinguishes that early Anglo-Norman text from all subsequent *chansons de geste*. Even the *Chanson de Guillaume*, the second oldest epic text (c. 1140) and also Anglo-Norman, weaves burlesque episodes into its plot.¹⁸ For example, in the very first battle we encounter a count so cowardly that he defecates in his breeches and flees blindly into a herd of sheep (lines 338–54, 386–402). Later episodes feature the comically naive actions and utterances of the child warrior Guiot, one of William's nephews, and zany feats performed by Rainouart, a giant scullion who becomes William's companion of arms. In the second half of the text, which may be of later vintage than the first, we are also entertained by a dialogue in which William's wife, Guibourc, refuses to let him back into his own city: she denies at length that the battered hero, hotly pursued by a Saracen army and desperately knocking at the gate, could possibly be her husband (lines 2237–325). She only relents after he agrees to remove his helmet and display the astonishing bump that adorns his nose. Such moments of buffoonery have no place in the Oxford *Roland*, but they do crop up in many *chansons de geste*. The Oxford *Roland* maintains a higher decorum, even in scenes where the traitor Ganelon is handed over to cooks and servants for flogging (laissez 137 and 270), and that sustained sense of seriousness sets it apart from all other French medieval epics. Most *chansons de geste* welcome borrowings from other literary modes, particularly comedy and romance.

The Oxford *Roland* barely concedes a cameo appearance to the deceased hero's bereft fiancée, Aude (laisse 268). Charlemagne tells her of Roland's death and she dies at once. All other versions of the *Roland* seize the opportunity to insert a heart-rending scene at this juncture: they have Aude engaging in poignant dialogues with Charlemagne and her brother Olivier, lamenting over Roland's corpse, and pleading with God. Such rhetorical pathos abounds in twelfth-century romances, whether based on classical lore (*romans d'Antiquité*) or on courtly Arthurian narratives. Virtually all *chansons de geste* borrow freely from that vein, when it suits them. Not so the Oxford *Roland*. Its Aude cuts short Charlemagne after he breaks the news to her, a blow that he clumsily tries to soften by offering her the hand of his son Louis. Her response is terse: "Cest mot mei est estrange" ("That talk is foreign to me"; line 3717). She will not transfer her loyalty. Neither will she, as a narrative character, cross the boundary from romance into epic and its politics of matrimonial alliances between lineages.

The broad comedy of jongleur performance and the ornate lamentations of lovers in romances are two quite different literary currents. They do, however, have one thing in common: both are chiefly designed to entertain their audiences. When they enter a *chanson de geste*, both operate a ludic intrusion into the high epic mode of historical and moral instruction. Such intrusions are found in all *chansons de geste* save one. The Oxford *Roland* alone insists on maintaining an archaic dignity. The later texts all resort to audience pleasing ploys: here and there, each of them will suspend epic gravity in order to draw laughs from the listeners or to induce vicarious heart flutters. The Oxford *Roland* attempts perhaps to keep alive an earlier tradition of oral heroic poetry in vernacular French, one that placed more weight on

commemorative instruction than on entertainment (Vance 1986: 51–85). As Robert Lafont suggests, the original social function of the *chansons de geste*, before they were taken over by the jongleurs, may have been a ritual reenactment of ancestral deeds, performed in a sanctuary as a ceremonial song, possibly combined with a dance procession (1991a: II, 150). The jongleurs who recited *chansons de geste* like the poets who wrote chivalric romances achieved greater success by being entertaining. Snippets of didacticism were tolerable to the listeners; long stretches of it were not.

Thirteenth-century clerics frequently railed against the jongleurs whom they accused of pandering to their listeners in more ways than one. The clerics also disparaged the medium of vernacular verse that was the jongleurs' stock-in-trade (Spiegel 1993: 60). Certain jongleurs defended themselves as best they could by conceding that old lore needed to be spruced up, renewed, and rendered more courtly (for example, *La Mort Aymeri de Narbonne*, lines 3, 16). But competition from vernacular prose chronicles in the end prevented the jongleurs from retaining very strong credibility as tellers of things past.

To be sure, the *chansons de geste* reached vast audiences, while the *Grandes Chroniques* were initially intended for an elite court public. Yet the *Grandes Chroniques* have come down to us in over a hundred manuscripts, whereas only seven manuscripts preserve any French or Franco-Italian version of the *Chanson de Roland* – in addition to which, the Oxford *Roland* (Digby MS 23) is markedly different from the rest of its group. By the fourteenth century, the *Pseudo-Turpin* and the *Grandes Chroniques* generally surpassed the *chansons de geste* in authority and purported credibility. Their prose account of Charlemagne's expedition to Spain and the battle of Roncevaux had for many literary audiences stolen the limelight away from the epics performed by jongleurs in earlier centuries.

Notes

- 1 For evidence and examples of oral *chanson de geste* performances by minstrels, see Page 1989: 30–3, 42–4, 69–73, 177–8, 219–20.
- 2 Paris 1865. Cogent historical synopses of the events of 778 and of post-1830 *Chanson de Roland* criticism are furnished by Vance 1970: 96–105. For a judicious critique and revision of the *cantilène* hypothesis, see Delbouille 1959. Overall, see also the chapter by Joseph Duggan in this volume.
- 3 E.g., Menéndez Pidal (1960: 220–2) for Basques alone, Horrent (1973) for Basques alongside Arabs, Aebischer (1972) for Gascons rather than Basques.
- 4 One prime example is the expedition led by Guilhem VIII of Aquitaine and the Norman commander Robert Crespin that brought about the sack of Barbastro in 1065 (Lafont 1991b: 18). Another notable example is the capture of Zaragoza (Saragosse) in 1118, achieved by Alfonso I of Aragon with the support of Gaston IV of Béarn and the Norman Rotrou de Perche (Lafont 1991b: 22–3; Larrea 1998: 476–7; Kinoshita 2006: 25, 243).
- 5 A heroic poem about Roland seems to have been known in Normandy by the year 1066: a chronicle passage alleges that a minstrel called Taillefer sang it to William the Conqueror's

men during the Battle of Hastings. But that verse chronicle, *Le Roman de Rou*, was composed by the Anglo-Norman writer Wace about one century later than the Norman conquest of England (Taylor 2001: 28–9).

- 6 This received notion, however, has been shrewdly challenged by Stephen G. Nichols (1969: 65–77).
- 7 The entire cohort was published by Raoul Mortier (1940–4).
- 8 However, Mandach thinks that the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* was more likely written by Pedro de Andoca (Pierre d'Andouque), bishop of Pamplona (1083–1115) and of Occitan origin (1961: 66–73). Aimeri Picaud, for his part, was a monk of Parthenay-le-Vieux in Poitou.
- 9 For example, several stanzas in the Oxford *Roland* manuscript (copied c. 1170) lavish tell-tale praise on the Angevin lineage of Henry II Plantagenêt (Keller 1993: 90–1; Aurell 2003: 20).
- 10 Peter Haidu, nevertheless, maintains that the Oxford *Roland* presages the emergence of a powerful and prestigious Capetian monarchy: the poem is itself “the earliest ideological act toward the accomplishment of the reign of Philip Augustus [1180–1223]: the establishment of the first lineaments of a French nation-state” (Haidu 1993: 209).
- 11 Roland’s half-brother Baudouin (i.e., Ganelon’s son) and Thierry d’Anjou, who will later defeat Pinabel in judicial combat right on the site of Roncevaux.
- 12 E.g., *The Old French Johannes Translation of the “Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*, ed. Walpole, 162. This explanation receives even greater development in the *Grandes Chroniques de France*, ed. Mortier 1940–4, III: 63.
- 13 The ruse of tempting one’s enemy into depraved acts that antagonize God recalls the biblical episode of the Israelite warriors seduced by Moabite and Midianite women (Numbers 25: 1–5, 16–18; 31: 13–18). Moses denounces that sexual abomination instigated, he says, by Balaam and, in retaliation, he orders his polluted army to slay all Midianite women save young virgins. I thank David Konstan for drawing my attention to this biblical antecedent.
- 14 Including *La Mort Aimeri de Narbonne* at lines 1387, 1821, 2210, 2597.
- 15 For example, *Chanson de Guillaume*, lines 220, 1261, 2101, 3158, 3167; *Aiol*, laisses 52, 166, 257, 283; *Prise d’Orange*, laisses 2, 39; *Enfances Garin de Monglane*, lines 333, 5069.
- 16 The actual Saint Giles, a hermit of Provence, probably died around 710, i.e., before the lifetime of Charlemagne’s own father.
- 17 For example, the *Liber* encourages pilgrims to visit William of Orange’s tomb in the abbey of Gellone founded by him in Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert (Hérault): Vielliard 1963: 46–8. See also Suard 1993: 75.
- 18 London, British Library, Additional MS 38663.

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A Recurrent Theme of the Spanish Medieval Epic: Complaints and Laments by Noble Women

MERCEDES VAQUERO

Medieval Spanish epics (such as *Cantar de mio Cid*, *Siete infantes de Lara*, *Sancho II* or *Mocedades de Rodrigo*) not only offer excellent insights into the process of the treatment of history in narrative poetry, but also provide a good base for the analysis of social conditions and social concerns at the time when the epics were sung. In these songs female main characters, highly aware of their status as noble ladies, lament their grave situation because their honor has been stained. Since this is a recurrent theme of Spanish medieval epic, we can safely assume that the audiences of these songs were not just the supposed male audiences of the romance epics.

This chapter analyzes the complaints and laments of three important women of medieval Spanish epic in order to establish the destabilizing nature of gender in this essentially masculine genre. The gendered language and gendered behavior to be examined appear in

- 1 Doña Lambra's complaints. (Lambra is the wife of Ruy Velázquez, one of the main characters in the songs of *Siete infantes de Lara* or *Seven Young Men of Lara*).
- 2 Doña Urraca's complaints. (Urraca is the daughter of King Fernando I, the father of Sancho II and of Alfonso VI, and one of the main characters in the songs of *Sancho II*).
- 3 Doña Jimena's laments and complaints. (In the ballads under examination Jimena, the Cid's future wife, is not married yet to the Castilian hero. These ballads belong to the *Mocedades de Rodrigo* epic cycle or the songs of the *Youthful Deeds of the Cid*).

The Appendix to this chapter contains some excerpts of these epic texts, including part of the very popular ballad of Doña Alda (Roldán's bride, an important character

in the Iberian versions of the *Chanson de Roland*) with echoes of the motifs under discussion.

No poetic versions of the *Seven Young Men of Lara* or of the *Song of Sancho II* have survived, but nobody questions their existence. Excerpts 1 and 2 of the Appendix come from the prosifications of those songs by a team of historians under Alfonso X in the thirteenth century. It is probable that these songs existed in more than one version, particularly because the Alfonsine historians at times tell us that their account of these stories is based on the "songs sung" by the minstrels or *juglares*. As a common feature, all these stories contain historical elements, although these vary in extent from song to song. In all the songs under discussion here (with the exception of *Sancho II*) the historical content is small. In all of them, as has been amply demonstrated, in the construction of the plot history is subordinated to fiction (Deyermond 1976: 283–4). Their plot outlines and the motifs they elaborate, like those I will analyze here, belong to the familiar stock of traditional Spanish epic. The pattern common to these stories is pervasive in French and Spanish epic: family quarrel, insult, treachery, punishment, with great emphasis on vengeance and, in some cases, counter-vengeance (Deyermond 1976: 285).

In all these stories traditional units recur, "with their parts belonging together by a kind of thematic attraction" in the Lordian sense (Deyermond 1976: 289).¹ In particular, we find a noble lady insulted or offended, and her lament and/or complaint.

In the first part of the unit a servant of the noble lady is shown seeking refuge under her mantle; the sanctuary is violated, the servant is dragged away and brought to justice. In the second part, the noble lady laments the offense, presents her complaints, and demands revenge. These two parts or motifs are intertwined in this way in the *Seven Young Men of Lara* (Appendix no. 1), and in the *Youthful Deeds of the Cid* (Appendix no. 3a). They can also be found, although in a different sequence, in the songs of *Sancho II*, and I believe there is a remnant of them in the ballad of Doña Alda (Appendix no. 4).

Sequence of Motifs, Thematic Attraction

I begin by examining the song of the *Seven Young Men of Lara*, perhaps the first Spanish epic from around 1000 (Deyermond 1976: 282).² The story begins with the wedding in Burgos of Ruy Velázquez and Doña Lambra, cousin of Count Garci Fernández, Castile's ruler. In the middle of the wedding festivities rivalry develops: Alvar Sánchez, Doña Lambra's cousin, insults Gonzalo González, the youngest of the seven brothers of Lara, who are nephews of the groom. Alvar Sánchez is killed by young Gonzalo. To establish peace in the family, the young men's father sends his sons to serve Doña Lambra. Trouble flares up again at Doña Lambra's estate at Barbadillo. One day at the garden in her house, while young Gonzalo is preparing to bathe his hunting hawk, she feels insulted by seeing him in "shirt tails." She believes that the young man is trying to provoke her and her women sexually. In

revenge, Lambra orders a servant to throw a gourd full of blood at her nephew. The revenge miscarries: the *infantes* end up killing the servant who has taken refuge under his lady's mantle (Appendix no. 1). To avenge this new insult, Doña Lambra engages in an agonized lament and persuades her husband Ruy Velázquez to arrange to kill the seven young men.

The sequence of motifs here follows the pattern described earlier. Theme A (the servant seeks protection under his lady's mantle, is dragged away and killed), calls forth theme B (an elaborated mourning scene where the noble lady laments the offense, presents her complaints, and demands revenge).

The work of Parry and Lord has accustomed us to the idea that oral epic poets rely on a common stock of formulae (Deyermond 1976: 289), with which they build up larger narrative units (motifs or themes).³ One such formula may be identified in Lambra's lament (Appendix no. 1, in bold), where she is "calling herself a widow and one who had no husband." This formula will appear again in the song of *Sancho II*, in Urraca's laments. Here, in the song of the *Seven Young Men of Lara*, its presence is extraordinary, because we know that Doña Lambra, first cousin of the Count of Castile, is very well married to Ruy Velázquez, a noble man and perhaps the best vassal of Castile's ruler. He is also the uncle of the seven young men. At any rate, after the offense, when Ruy Velázquez returns to Barbadillo, Doña Lambra demands revenge (Appendix no. 1), and she will be successful: her husband does indeed have the *infantes* slain.

Next I examine the ballads where Doña Jimena laments her situation and demands justice (Appendix no. 3a: 5–6):

I live in dishonor, King, the same with which my mother lives;
every dawning day I see the man who killed my father.

She explains the "dishonor," caused by young Rodrigo, the Cid:

he feeds his [hunting] bird in my dovecote;
with the blood of my doves he has stained my dress [. . .]
he killed my little page under the folds of my dress.

(This is the same motif as in *Seven Young Men of Lara* and in *Sancho II*.) In these lines, as in the excerpts included in Appendix nos. 3b and 3c, emphasis is placed on the corporeality of women, not only regarding the violation of Jimena's dress-sanctuary, but also the threat of violating her ladies, both married and yet to wed (in italics in 3a), and their metamorphosis into doves (3b and 3c), or in the metaphor of the violated dovecote, the hawk feeding on the slain doves, or the blood of the slain doves staining Jimena's dress (3b).

In the song of *Sancho II* the sequence of the motifs is different: laments and demands for justice come first (Appendix no. 2). The princess Doña Urraca, learning that her dying father is in severe pain and has forgotten to include her in his will, mounts her mule and, accompanied by 100 noble ladies-in-waiting, takes off to see

him. Once in Cabeçón, she and her ladies remove their veils and begin to weep with the most dolorous sobs man has ever heard. In the course of this loud lament we hear that she was once betrothed to the Emperor of Germany who died before their marriage was consummated; hence she is now neither a widow nor married. (This is the same lament we heard Doña Lambra utter, above.) To add salt to her wounds, her father has now forgotten her completely in the division of his kingdoms.

In this episode, in front of the dying father, her brother, Alfonso, will remedy the mistake by giving her the city of Zamora from his share of the inheritance. In the song, and this is its main theme, we hear that her brother Sancho has laid siege to the city of Zamora. Urraca offers her person and wealth to the man who breaks the siege. Vellido Adolfo answers the call and murders Sancho treacherously. Here the motif of the violated sanctuary recurs: when the regicide Vellido Adolfo seeks refuge under the mantle of the infanta Doña Urraca, he is dragged away and brought to justice (Fraker 1974: 469). According to some late versions of this song, Vellido Adolfo will be quartered by four wild horses. Quartering, as is well known, is the punishment given to the traitor Ganelon in the *Chanson de Roland* (Vaquero 1989: 142–5).

Returning to the main motif under examination here, Lambra, Jimena, Urraca, and to some extent Alda (Roldán's bride, Appendix no. 4 and below), at critical moments in the life of one of their vassals, use their cloaks or skirts as sanctuaries, and these sanctuaries are violated. These motifs are an important source of information regarding the articulation of power in medieval Castile. They also have clear implications for the portrayal of social gender roles and for the use of gendered language.

The motif of a vassal seeking sanctuary under the mantle of his lady corresponds to a Castilian legal custom of Germanic origin. In the *Great Chronicle of Alfonso XI*, we find that in 1326, during the reign of this monarch, the people of Valladolid revolted against the royal tax collector, Don Yuzaf de Écija. He managed to save his life thanks to the sanctuary that the infanta Doña Leonor gave him under her cloak. This Germanic custom was practiced also in other kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula; for example, the *fueros*, or legal charters, of Aragón and Navarra mention this customary privilege (Ménendez Pidal 1971: 6 n. 4).⁴

Erotic Aspects, Oral Performance

To do me greater outrage he feeds his bird in my dovecote,
with the blood of my doves he has stained my dress.
I have sent to tell him of my grief, and he sends to threaten
that he will cut away my skirts to my shame,
that he will violate my ladies both married and yet to wed,
he killed my little page under the folds of my dress.
(Doña Jimena's laments and complaints. Appendix no. 3a)

In the epic texts under examination here the motifs discussed so far contain multiple erotic connotations. As critics have pointed out, the penetration and the staining of the cloak or dress with blood of the vassal can be interpreted as a physical rape

(Lacarra 1993: 339–40). On a symbolic level, these episodes reveal a complex duel of erotic images and introduce a sexual undercurrent between the characters involved in them.⁵

In the ballad of Doña Alda, the noble lady explains to her companions:

I dreamt a dream, my ladies, that has given me great grief
 I found myself on a mountain in a most deserted place;
 I saw a hawk flying from under the highest mountains,
 pursued by an eagle that chased it ravenously.
 The hawk, in grave danger, hid itself under my dress;
 with rabid anger, the eagle pulled it out.
 It plucked out its feathers with its claws, and tore it apart with its beak.

(Appendix no. 4)

One of the companions offers a curious interpretation of the noble lady's dream: "The hawk is your husband [. . .] you, yourself are the eagle, with whom he is to be wed." Given what we just read about the eagle's violent treatment of the hawk, it is clear that the lady-in-waiting who interprets the dream indeed believes that her lady's erotic desires are extraordinary.

The epic motifs under discussion raise interesting questions regarding oral performance. For example, if we assume that medieval Iberian epic was sung mainly by male singers, how do we interpret these vociferous laments and complaints by female characters? Did the singers distort them? Did they satirize them? Did they emphasize them?

The elaborate laments by Doña Lambra and Doña Urraca (see Appendix) suggest a comparison of the minstrels' recitation with those of professional mourners or *plañideras* whose miserable excesses sometimes disturbed the public authorities. As the historian Angus MacKay (1977: 191–2) points out, by the mid-fifteenth century funeral practices contained extreme manifestations of grief that were enhanced by the hiring of professional female mourners. For example, the acts of the town council of Jerez for April 1455 record that,

inasmuch as it has become known that at the funeral of Juan Catalán which took place yesterday, Tuesday, the women who accompanied his body to the monastery of Santo Domingo of this town made noises of grief in a shameful manner and contrary to the ruling of the Holy Church, and inasmuch as this is a survival from the period of the Gentiles . . . it was ordered that henceforth no persons attending funerals should make lamentations of this kind in the streets and urban districts on pain of a fine of three hundred *mrs.* (MacKay 1977: 192)

These public signs of mourning were probably not too different from those of Doña Urraca and her ladies in waiting (Appendix no. 2, in italics) or of Doña Lambra:

for three days she and all of her ladies wept over it with such great sobs that it was a wonder to see; and she rent all of her garments . . . and she ran to him [her husband] with her skin scratched and tears pouring from her eyes. (Appendix no. 1, in italics)

What is interesting about the noble ladies' laments, including those of Lambra and Jimena (Appendix no. 3a), is that they do not cry for the dead vassals; they complain about the offense committed against their own bodies that have been used and violated as sanctuaries.

Comparison of the elaboration of these two motifs in the epic texts prompts the question of whether the professional recitation of epics was subject to stable rules. I myself doubt that it was a firmly "codified" and stable social institution. Although epic is associated with recitation by a professional male singer, and although we may suspect that the *juglares* (minstrels) were able to imitate professional female mourners with their voices and gestures, I nevertheless believe that episodes like these are open to all kind of negotiations, particularly related to gender construction and the definition and the social status of women. All the laments discussed here are clearly sexually marked, and they also connect death and sexuality, along with some form of relation to marriage.⁶

Audience, Gender, and Social Conditions

As Alan Deyermond (1988) has pointed out, all these women in Spanish epic are not only fully aware of their sexuality but also know how to manipulate it to survive and triumph socially. To illustrate this, let us return to the formula "now I am neither a widow nor married," uttered by Doña Lambra and Doña Urraca in their laments. Urraca first laments her social status, and indeed she is neither married nor a widow (like Doña Alda in the *Song of Roland's* tradition), but her concern really is not about her marriage or lack of marriage but about the threat of being dishinherited by her father. That is why she threatens her father, King Ferdinand, that if he does not change his intention she will offer her person (that is, her body) to the Moors for money, to the Christians for free.⁷ Urraca's words may be extreme but they make sense. What about those of Doña Lambra? Why does she call herself a widow and one who has no husband, when her husband is alive? Is she saying this because her husband is not present at the moment of the offense? Or is it a badly used epic formula, thematically attracted by the noble woman's lament?

It certainly is a formula, since it occurs also in the *Refranes que dicen las viejas tras el fuego* (*The collection of proverbs that old women say in front of the fire*) by the Marqués de Santillana (fifteenth century; Bizarri 2001: 187): "Haxa enlodada: ni biuda ni casada" ("Haxa [or Moorish woman dressed in fine attire], covered with mud, is neither widowed nor married").⁸ Could this proverb apply also to the noble women of the Spanish epic? Are they "covered with mud" or morally stained?

What does this formula imply? Or what does the relation between death and sexuality imply? Is sexuality here related to marriage? I do not think so, with the possible exception of Jimena. In the excerpts reproduced in Appendix no. 3, she makes a marriage petition to the king in order to repair her dishonor. What the king in the ballad (and probably the audience as well) finds extraordinary about the petition is that Jimena is asking for the Cid as a husband, that is, that she wants to

marry the man who dishonored her (3a): “give me as husband the Cid / who slew my father. The man who has done me so much wrong.” The king, in awe of her petition, replies:

I have always heard it said, and now I know it true,
that women’s judgment is an unnatural thing;
for until now she has sought justice and now she wishes to marry him!

What the king and the audience see as unreasonable is that Jimena will exact revenge on Rodrigo by marrying him.

Beresford (2000: 42) has examined the representation of sexuality in several Iberian epic legends, not in terms of their erotic or sensual value, but in relation to one of the more traditional themes of the epic – death. In his study, he finds a surprising number of connections between death and marriage. As we have seen, that could be true in the case of Doña Jimena. However, in the case of the other two noble ladies, death is probably related to sexuality through fertility, procreation, and establishing a lineage. For Urraca and Lambra marriage does not involve a rise in social status: they already enjoy equal or higher status than their fiancé and husband, respectively. Lambra is first cousin of the ruler of Castile, Count Garci Fernandez, and her husband Ruy Velázquez is a noble man (“un alto omne”), a vassal of the Count of Castile. Urraca is the daughter of King Fernando and Queen Sancha: her father, as all epic songs emphasize, is equal to emperors. Jimena too is the daughter of a count, and her social status is superior to that of her future husband, the Cid, as we know, and the authors of the Cidian epic cycle knew.

Here, then, the relation between death and sexuality is not connected to a highly successful marriage: marriage is just a legal contract, and it will not give the women a superior social position. The relation between death and sexuality, then, must be associated with procreation or the maintenance of a lineage. This is the real tragedy of the song of the *Seven Young Men of Lara*. Lambra not only does not have children of her own, she also attempts to destroy the collateral lineage of her husband, that of the seven *infantes*. Urraca’s tragedy is not only that she has no descendants, but also that her father has erased her as an heir in his partition of the kingdoms and, according to her lament, she seems to be sentenced to childlessness.

Based on the evidence presented so far, the conclusion seems justified that in Spanish epic the dishonor suffered by a noble lady is a very important theme. It is one of the main topics in the epic cycle of the Counts of Castile, in the songs of the *Seven Young Men of Lara*, the song of *Sancho II*, and also in the Cidian epic cycle. For reasons of space, and because it has already evoked a good deal of critical interest, I have not discussed here the *Cantar de mio Cid*, the best-known song of the Cid cycle. Critics agree that the two major parts of the poem deal with the Cid’s honor, the first with its political, the second with its family-related aspects. The dishonor done to the bodies of the Cid’s daughters by the *infantes de Carrión* ironically will help the hero and his descendants achieve a higher social status (Pattison 2000: 120). The famous lines of the last *laisse* (*tirada*) of the *Cantar de mio Cid* encapsulate one of the most important messages of the story: “The Infantes

of Carrión had suffered deep disgrace. May such a fate or worse befall anyone who treats a noble lady shamefully and then abandons her!" (*The Poem of the Cid* 213, lines 3705–7, in Hamilton and Perry 1975).

This too is the important message of the other epic stories I am analyzing here, although of course with different connotations. A big difference between the *Cantar de mio Cid* and the other stories is that in the latter it is the honor of the women themselves that has been stained and is being judged; that is why the main female characters are possessed of a great awareness of their social status as noble ladies. It is they who demand vengeance; they ask for retaliation not in order to avenge the honor of a male character of their clan, but to avenge their own personal dishonor. Lambra, for instance, demands that her husband avenge her for the shame she has suffered. Jimena asks the king to avenge the offences Rodrigo has committed against her, and Urraca promises to take revenge on her father if he does not remedy her disinheritation.

The motifs under examination here are recurrent in Spanish epic and therefore must have some significance, probably related to the social status of noble women. If dishonored, they are like "Haxas," like those ladies dressed in fine attire and covered with mud, neither widowed nor married. These motifs help us understand who controlled the production and dissemination of Castilian epics, or at least what the role of their audience was in terms of gender and social status.

Martyrological Material

The motif of the violated sanctuary offered by a noble lady, the laments, the complaints, and the petitions for vengeance or retaliation have distinctively erotic and violent overtones. I suggest that these epics, whether consciously or unconsciously, draw on martyrological material.

It is well known that the legends of martyrs served as the primary inspiration for the development of hagiography about women in the vernacular languages, beginning as early as the ninth century. The earliest surviving literary work in any Romance language is the Old French *Séquence de Sainte Eulalie*, a brief liturgical piece from the late ninth century celebrating the martyrdom of Eulalia of Mérida. The hagiography of female saints flourished in the Romance languages in the years before 1300. John Walsh (1970) and Colbert Nepaulsingh (1983) have examined the influence of martyrological traditions on the Spanish epic. Recently, Jill Ross (2008) has studied the possible influence on Spanish epic of Prudentius, a fourth-century Hispano-Roman poet. According to Ross, Prudentius's *Peristephanon*, a series of poems dedicated to the martyrs of the early Christian Church, works as an intertext for the "Afrenta" (affront) episode in the *Poema de mio Cid*. In this episode, King Alfonso VI restores the Cid's honor and grants his daughters, Elvira and Sol, permission to marry the *infantes* of Carrión. These young men abuse and abandon their wives at the roadside, where they are tied to trees in the oak forest of Corpes. In the "Afrenta de Corpes" episode, the hero's daughters are modeled, as Walsh and Nepaulsingh have also pointed out, on the martyrdoms of female saints,

and particularly on the martyrdoms of Eulalia and Agnes in Prudentius's work (Ross 2008: 78–91).

Years ago, Deyrmond (1976, 1988) published several important works on Spanish epic, stressing the importance of women, and its divergence, in this respect, from French epic and its similarity to the Germanic and Icelandic traditions. He demonstrated that in the Iberian songs there is a relationship between sex and power that clearly differentiates them from the French *chansons de geste*; therefore, it would appear that the audiences of these songs did not consist solely of the male public that listened to other romance epics. Female passivity is not the norm in the majority of these songs. Strong – and in many instances vengeful – women characters dominate in the stories (Vaquero 2005). We do not know much about the performance of Spanish epic, but one suspects that it was sung in public rather than private. The episodes analyzed here, as we have seen, probably made use of martyrological material. It seems possible, therefore, to posit a connection with other genres also performed dramatically by minstrels. I am thinking of the performance of hagiographical stories such as those of virgin martyrs like Saint Agnes or Saint Eulalia, or the *Passio sanctorum martyrum Facundi et Primitivi*, preserved in a late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century manuscript in the Royal Academy of History in Madrid, that belonged to the monastery of Sahagún in León. Historians, including Elisa Ruiz (1998), who have studied the manuscript, believe that during the festivities of these saints their *passio* was probably performed or read aloud to the pilgrims in Sahagún (Appendix no. 5).

When reading the lives of some of these female saints, including Saint Agnes and Saint Eulalia of Mérida, one is also struck by their iconography. Both, for example, are represented with doves.⁹ Prudentius tells us in his *Hymn to St Eulalia* that at the moment of her death a white dove, symbolizing the soul, flew from her mouth and ascended to heaven. Prudentius's poem is said to have been recited in the Visigothic Church on Eulalia's feast day (Ross 2008: 81–2). Some critics have pointed out parallels between Dido and Eulalia (Roberts 1993: 92–101). The account of the martyrdom of Eulalia, which may be entirely a poetic fiction, is rich in sexual symbolism and allusion. According to Roberts, Eulalia's journey leads *per loca senta situ* ("through abandoned regions," v. 47), a phrase also found in Virgil's account of Aeneas's descent into the underworld (*Aeneid* 6.462). Roberts (1993: 92–101) suggests that the reader is intended to recall through this phrase the image of Dido in Hades as a source of sexual temptation for Aeneas, and that the rough places of Eulalia's journey thus possess similar connotations, even if she overcomes the temptations of sexual desire.

In Spanish epic, the daughters of the Cid, Doña Elvira and Doña Sol, offer a good example of young maidens being described as martyrs: they tell their husbands in the oak-forest of Corpes that they prefer to be decapitated rather than to be dishonored.

It is clear that some of the symbols and allusions in epic are related to hagiography. Perhaps due to a new social and cultural context in the Middle Ages, the innocent admiration of the early female martyrs was translated into a sinister commentary on the perversity of women's sexuality, and the social role expected of them. Yet

I would not be surprised if these epic stories were sung or recited along with the passions of Christian martyrs; as Elisa Ruiz suggests, both were probably recited by minstrels in the same locations (Appendix no. 5, in italics) and to the same audience (*ibid.*, in bold).

The relation established between the female body as both sanctuary and death points, I believe, to a connection with hagiographical texts. Experts on hagiography tell us that from the sixth century to the year 1100 the lives of women martyrs served as a kind of “mirror for princes” addressed to the female elite of the emerging European kingdoms. But from the 1100s on many members of the episcopal hierarchy seem to have regarded female sanctity as potentially dangerous (Noble and Head 1995: xxv. Head 1999). In subsequent centuries, fewer and fewer people came to be celebrated as saints after their deaths (Head 1999). Increasingly, the cult of saints focused on celebrated patrons from the distant past, including Fructuoso, Facundo, and Primitivo.

The lives of female martyrs and the epic stories I have discussed here, with their extraordinary female characters, would appear to reflect a similar pattern of edifying censorship. Women have a voracious sexual appetite, but there are ways to control it. Female characters are depicted ambiguously, since at the same time they have remarkable social power. The texts thus seem to endorse two competing and mutually irreconcilable gender ideologies. The sexuality of noble ladies plays an integral role in important parts of the story, and these women’s importance for the maintenance of noble lineage is undeniable, but their sexuality, which tends to violate boundaries, is a threat to societal order. It is connected to death and the extinction of lineages, and therefore its destabilizing nature must be, if not controlled, at least censured and deplored.

The laments that have been examined in this chapter would seem, then, to be the product of a particular historic moment, marking a transition in the representation of women’s autonomy – with all the tensions that such transitions entail. They perhaps also reflect a variation in the nature of the audience of the *chansons de geste* in Iberia, which in the case of such recitals may have included women, perhaps on the model of recitations of the lives of female saints – a genre that was itself losing popularity at this time. We have here, then, an interesting example of how a specific motif in an epic or quasi-epic tradition takes shape under the pressure of historical circumstances, achieves a certain apogee that is not without its own inherent ambiguities, and then recedes again in response to new conditions of social life.

Appendix¹⁰

1 *Doña Lambra’s complaints* (Siete infantes de Lara)

Ellos fueron estonces para ella, et tomáronle por fuerça **el omne que tenie so el manto**, et matárongele y luego delante, assí que l’ non pudo ella defender, nin otro ninguno por ella; et de las feridas que davan en éll, *cayó de la sangre sobre las tocas et en*

los pannos de donna Llambla, de guisa que todo fincó ende ensangrentada [. . .] Pues que ellos fueron idos, fizo donna Llambla poner un escanno en medio de su corral, guisado et cubierto de pannos como pora muerto, et lloró ella, *et fizo tan grand llanto sobr'ell con todas sus duennas tres días, que por maravilla fue; et rompió todos sus pannos, llamándose bibda et qu non avie marido*. [. . .] Estonces donna Llambla, quando sopo que vinie don Rodrigo, cató, et quando l' vio entrar por el palatio, *fuese pora éll toda rascada et llorando mucho de los ojos*, et echóse a sus pies pidiéndol' merced que l' pesasse mucho de la desondra que avie recebida de sus sobrinos, et que por Dios et por su mesura que l' diesse ende derecho. (Alvar & Alvar 1991: 184–5; my emphases)

They then approached her and took by force **the man she had under her cloak**, and killed him there in front of her, so that she could not defend him, nor could any other defend her. And *blood from his wounds flowed over Doña Lambra's wimple and garments, so that she was stained in blood* . . . Once they had gone, Doña Lambra had a bench put in the middle of the alcove, covered in linen like a shroud, *and for three days she and all of her ladies wept over it with such great sobs that it was a wonder to see; and she rent all of her garments, calling herself a widow and one who had no husband* . . . Then Doña Lambra, learning that Don Rodrigo was coming, looked up and saw him entering the palace, and *she ran to him with her skin scratched and tears pouring from her eyes*, and she threw herself at his feet, begging him for the mercy to feel sorrow at the infamy his nephews had brought upon her, and she implored him in the name of God and clemency to give her justice.

2 *Doña Urraca's complaints (Sancho II)*

La infante doña Urraca luego que lo sopo que su padre era maldoliente cavalgó con çient dueñas de linaje e fuesse para él a Cabeçón. E quando llegó al castillo falló a su amo don Arias Gonçalo [. . .] E él díxole que non era muerto, mas que yazía ya malcuytado [. . .] La infante quando esto oyó començó de llorar muy de rezio, e llamamarse desanparada [. . .] La infanta doña Urraca, luego que llegó a Cabeçón, desçendió ella *e todas las dueñas que con ella yvan de las mulas e tollieron las tocas desý, e començaron de llorar e de fazer el mayor llanto e el mayor duelo que omne viesse*. E dizié en llorando la infante doña Urraca: “¡Mesquina!, ¿qué faré o qué será de mí? ¡Non oviera de seer nasçida!, ¡seer fija de tan honrrado rey, e de reyna tan honrrada, e aver de andar por el mundo lazdrada e desenparada! ¡Más me valdrié la muerte!, ¡*ca, mal pecado, non será tal ninguno que me quiera aver que me non aya!*, e dirán todas las gentes por mi desonrra: ‘*Esta es la infante doña Urraca!*’” [. . .] Ellos en esto estando, entró la infante doña Urraca con todas sus dueñas por el palacio, metiendo bozes e faziendo el mayor llanto de el mundo, llamando e diziendo: “¡Padre sseñor!, ¿qué fize yo porque assí finco deseredada?” E después que ella llegó al logar hó el rey don Ferrando yazié en pasamiento, tomóle ella por la mano e besógela, diziéndole assí: “¡Aquí yazedes el rey don Ferrando, mi manzilla e mi quebranto grande; malo fue aquel día que yo nasçí, ca padre señor, partistes vós los regnos e a mí non me distes nada, e finco desanparada e lazdrada. E quien vos conssejó que me non diéssedes nada, fizolo muy mal, *ca ssé yo que seredes muy pecador de mí*, e por ende píдовos por merçed que vos acordedes de mí!” (*Crónica de veinte reyes*: 83r–84v; my emphases)

The princess Doña Urraca, after learning that her father was in dire pain, mounted her horse with one hundred noble ladies-in-waiting and set out for Cabeçon to see him. And when she arrived at the castle, she found her tutor, Don Arias Gonçalo . . . and he told her that her father had not yet died, but that he lay sorely afflicted . . . Hearing this, the princess began to weep bitterly, calling herself forsaken . . . After arriving at Cabeçon, the princess Doña Urraca and *all of the ladies accompanying her dismounted their mules and removed their veils, and began to weep with the most dolorous sobs that ever man saw*. And the princess Doña Urraca said in crying: "My perdition! What shall I do, and what will become of me? I should never have been born! To be the daughter of such an honored king, and of such an honored queen, and to have to walk through the world disgraced and abandoned! Death would be more welcome to me! *For there will be none so wicked and base that he will not be able to have his way with me, and all of the people will say to my shame: 'This is the princess Doña Urraca!'*" . . . While they were doing this, Doña Urraca entered the palace with all of her ladies, letting out the greatest cries in the world, calling out, "Father, my lord! What have I done to be thus disinherited of land?" And approaching the bed where don Fernando lay in his death throes, she took his hand and kissed it, saying thus: "Here lies the king Don Fernando, cause of my injury and my great suffering; evil was the day upon which I was born, since you, my sire, divided the kingdoms and gave me nothing, and I inherit only disgrace and misfortune. And whoever advised you to give me nothing was in the wrong, *as I know that you will sin greatly on my account*, and therefore I ask of you the mercy to remember me!"

3 *Doña Jimena's laments and complaints* (Mocedades de Rodrigo)

3a "*Jimena pide justicia*"

Día era de los reyes, día era señalado,	
cuando dueñas y doncellas al rey piden aguinaldo;	2
sino es Jimena Gómez, hija del conde Lozano,	
que puesta delante el rey, d'esta manera ha hablado:	4
– Con mancilla vivo, rey, con ella, vive mi madre;	
cada día que amanece veo quien mató a mi padre,	6
caballero en un caballo y en su mano un gavilán,	
otra vez con un halcón que trae para cazar.	8
Por me hacer más enojo cébalo en mi palomar,	
con sangre de mis palomas ensangrentó mi brial;	10
enviéselo a decir, envióme a amenazar	
que me cortará mis haldas por vergonzoso lugar,	12
<i>me forzará mis doncellas casadas y por casar,</i>	
matárame un pajecico so haldas de mi brial.	14
Rey que no hace justicia no debía de reinar,	
ni cabalgar en caballo, ni espuela de oro calzar	16
ni comer pan a manteles, ni con la reina holgar	
ni oír misa en sagrado porque no merece más. –	18

El rey, de que aquesto oyera, comenzara de hablar:
 – Oh, váleme Dios del cielo, quiérame Dios aconsejar. 20
 Si yo prendo o mato al Cid, mis cortes se volverán;
 y si no hago justicia mi alma lo pagará. 22
 – Tente las tus cortes, rey, no te las revuelva nadie;
 al Cid que mató a mi padre dámelo tú por igual, 24
 que quien tanto mal me hizo sé que algún bien me hará. –
 Entonces dijera el rey, bien oiréis lo que dirá: 26
 – Siempre lo oí decir, y agora veo que es verdad:
 que el seso de las mujeres que no era natural; 28
 hasta aquí pidió justicia, ya quiere con él casar.
 (Díaz-Mas 1994: 94–6; my emphases)

It was the feast-day of the Kings, a famous day,
 when ladies and maidens pray to the king for tokens of good will.
 All except for Jimena Gomez, daughter of the count Lozano
 who kneels in front of the king and speaks to him in this manner:
 “I live in dishonor, King, the same with which my mother lives;
 every dawning day I see the man who killed my father
 a knight on a horse and perched on his hand a hawk
 or sometimes a falcon for the hunt.
 To do me greater outrage he feeds his bird in my dovecote,
 with the blood of my doves he has stained my dress.
 I have sent to tell him of my grief, and he sends to threaten
 that he will cut away my skirts to my shame,
that he will violate my ladies both married and yet to wed,
he killed my little page under the folds of my dress.
 A king who does not do justice should not rule,
 nor mount a horse nor wear a golden spur
 nor eat bread at tables spread nor spend his leisure with the queen
 nor hear mass in the holy Church because he deserves no more.”
 The king, hearing this, begins to speak:
 “O help me, God of heaven! Let God advise me:
 if I seize or kill the Cid, my courts will rebel;
 if I do not do justice my soul shall pay!”
 “Fear not your courts, King, no one shall rebel against you;
 give me as husband the Cid who slew my father.
 The man who has done me so much wrong I know shall do me some good.”
 Then spoke the king, as you shall now hear:
 “I have always heard it said, and now I know it true,
 that women’s judgment is an unnatural thing;
 for until now she has sought justice and now she wishes to marry him!”

3b “*Jimena pide justicia*”

En Burgos está el buen rey asentado a su yantar,
 cuando la Jimena Gómez se le vino a querellar.

Cubierta toda de luto, tocas de negro cendal,
las rodillas por el suelo comenzara de hablar: 4
– “Con mancilla vivo, rey, con ella murió mi madre;
cada día que amanece veo al que mató a mi padre, 6
caballero en un caballo, y en su mano **un gavilan**;
por facerme más despecho **céballo en mi palomar**, 8
mátame mis palomillas criadas y por criar;
la sangre que sale de ellas teñido me ha mi brial: 10
enviéselo a decir, envióme a amenazar.
Hacedme, buen rey, justicia, no me la queráis negar.”
(Petersen 2003; my emphasis)

The good king is in Burgos seated to eat,
when Jimena Gomez comes to him with her appeal.
Dressed all in mourning, with a veil of dark gauze,
she kneels on the ground and begins to speak:
– “I live in dishonor, King, the same with which my mother died;
every dawning day I see the man who killed my father,
a knight on his horse and perched on his hand **a hawk**;
to do me more spite **it feeds in my dovecote**,
it kills my doves, grown and young alike;
the blood that runs from them has stained my dress;
I have sent to tell him of my grief, and he sends threats in reply.
Give me justice, good King, do not wish to deny it to me.”

3c “*Jimena pide justicia*”

Cada día que amanece veo quien mató a mi padre
y me pasa por la puerta, por me dar mayor pesar, 2
con un falcón en la mano que trae para cazar;
mátame mis palomillas que están en mi palomar. 4
(Petersen 2003; my emphasis)

Every dawning day I see the man who killed my father
and he passes by my door, to bring upon me greater grief,
with a falcon perched on his hand, that he brings for the hunt;
he kills the little doves that are in my dovecote.

4 “*Romance de Doña Alda*” (Cantar de Roldán)

En París está Doña Alda, la esposa de don Roldán,
trescientas damas con ella para la acompañar; 2
[. . .]
– Un sueño soñé, doncellas, que me ha dado gran pesar: 14
que me veía en un monte en un desierto lugar;

de so los montes muy altos **un azor** vide volar, 16
 tras dél viene **una aguillilla** que lo ahinca muy mal;
el azor, con grande cuita, **metióse so mi brial**; 18
 el aguillilla, con grande ira de allí lo iba a sacar.
 Con las uñas lo despluma, con el pico lo deshace.– 20
 Allí habló su camarera, bien oiréis lo que dirá:
 – Aqueste sueño, señora, bien os lo entiendo soltar: 22
el azor es vuestro esposo que viene de allén la mar,
el águila sodes vos, con la cual ha de casar . . .
 (Díaz-Mas 1994: 220–1; my emphasis)

Doña Alda, the wife of Don Roldán, is in Paris,
 accompanied by three hundred ladies; . . .
 – “I dreamt a dream, my ladies, that has given me great grief:
 I found myself on a mountain in a most deserted place;
 I saw a **hawk** flying from under the highest mountains,
 persued by an **eagle** that chased it ravenously.
 The **hawk**, in grave danger, **hid itself under my dress**;
 with rabid anger, the eagle pulled it out.
 It plucked out its feathers with its claws, and tore it apart with its beak.” –
 Then spoke her companion, and you shall now hear what she said:
 – “I know well how to interpret this dream, my lady:
The hawk is your husband who comes from the far-off sea,
you, yourself are the eagle, with whom he is to be wed.”

5 *Passio sanctorum martyrum Facundi et Primitivi (probably sung to the pilgrims in the monastery of Sahagún)*

El cenobio debió de ejercer en la comarca una notable influencia en todos los órdenes: económico, político y religioso. Como corolario de todo ello cabe suponer la afluencia de numerosos peregrinos y una intensificación del culto de los santos patronos. El día de su festividad se celebraba una feria anual que congregaba mercaderes y público en general. En este marco hay que situar el desarrollo de la *passio* como tema de inspiración, tanto en su vertiente literaria como artística . . . **El núcleo original de la historia derivó probablemente hacia formas narrativas más afines con los gustos de las gentes que acudían a estas manifestaciones populares. Sabemos que los juglares cultivaban este filón: “Sunt [. . .] qui dicuntur ioculatores, qui cantant gesta principum et uitas sanctorum, et faciunt solatia hominibus”.** *Tal vez como complemento de las ceremonias religiosas se organizaran actuaciones en el atrio de la iglesia, ya que este ámbito marcaba un espacio de socialización y de tránsito entre el mundo laical y el eclesiástico.* (Ruiz 1998: 263; my emphases)

The monastery must have had a remarkable influence in the region in many respects: economic, political, and religious. As a result, we can assume the visit of increasing numbers of pilgrims and an intensified cult of the monastery’s patron saints. On the day of their festivities an annual fair took place that attracted merchants and the general

public. It is within this social context that we must situate the development of the *passio* as a theme of inspiration in literature as well as other artistic spheres. **The kernel of the story probably developed towards narrative forms more in line with the tastes of the common people that attended these celebrations. We know that the *juglares* performed these narratives: “Sunt [. . .] qui dicuntur ioculatores, qui cantant gesta principum et uitas sanctorum, et faciunt solatia hominibus.”** *Perhaps as a complement to the religious ceremonies, they offered performances in the vestibule of the church, given that this location marked a space of socialization and transit between the outer, the secular and inner, ecclesiastical worlds.*

Notes

- 1 “Sometimes the presence of theme a in a song calls forth the presence of theme b somewhere in the song . . . Where the association is not linear, it seems to me that we are dealing with a force or ‘tension’ that might be termed ‘submerged.’ . . . I call it a ‘tension of essences’” (Lord 1960: 97).
- 2 Lacarra (2005) and Zaderenko (1997) have suggested that the song of the *Seven Young Men of Lara* was composed in the thirteenth century.
- 3 “[T]he poet thinks of his song in terms of broader themes . . . There is a common stock of formulas . . . and there is a common stock of themes which we can conveniently label . . . To [the singer/poet] the formulas and themes are always used in association one with another; they are always part of a song” (Lord 1960: 95).
- 4 Menéndez Pidal (1971: 6 n. 4) notes that Doña Lambra was dishonored enormously: killing a vassal in the presence of a noble lady was a major affront, but murdering him under her mantle was even greater. According to Germanic legal custom the mantle was a sanctuary. For the relationship between medieval Spanish epic and Germanic law see Vaquero 2005: 73–82. For allusions to the Visigothic code in the *Sancho II* see Fraker 1990.
- 5 See Bluestine 1982 for a good analysis of the sexual symbolism in *Siete infantes de Lara*.
- 6 For an analysis of the relationship between death and sexuality in Spanish medieval epics, see Beresford (2000).
- 7 For Urraca’s complaints see the ballad “Morir vos queredes, padre” (Díaz-Mas 1994: 76–8).
- 8 According to Covarrubias 1611/1995: 143, “Axa” means Moorish woman dressed in fine attire (“Axa. Vale tanto, en lengua árábica, como la adornada y la ataviada”).
- 9 Three paleochristian virgin martyrs (Agatha of Sicily, Eulalia of Mérida, and Cecilia) guide the visionary Saint Oria (La Rioja, 1043–70) to heaven in the *Poema de Santa Oria* (c. 1250) by Gonzalo de Berceo. In her first vision, the three virgin martyrs, who carry three white doves, invite her to ascend to heaven, and tell her: “Tú mucho te deleitas en las nuestras passiones, / de amor e de grado leyes nuestras razones, / queremos que entiendas entre las visiones, / qual gloria reçibimos e quales galardones” (st. 34, ed. Uria Maqua 1987: 102, “You enjoy very much our *passiones*, / with love and pleasure you read our stories; / we want you to understand in your visions / which glory and which rewards we received”). The three martyrs give a dove to Oria in order to lead her to heaven. According to Uria Maqua, in early Christianity the white dove symbolizes the death of a virgin martyr (101, n. xxxiic).

- 10 I would like to thank Jordan Elkind (Brown University '08) for translating all the medieval Spanish excerpts into English.

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History in Medieval Scandinavian Heroic Literature and the Northwest European Context

ROBERT D. FULK

An ironic aspect of the search for historicity in epic literature is that the role played by history itself in much epic is fundamentally a fictionalizing one. That is, by invoking antiquity, the composers of heroic literature establish a certain distance between audience and epic setting, a distance that elicits the expectation of events that would not be plausible if set in the present moment. In medieval English literature a frank example (though found in a decidedly unheroic text) is the opening of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* (c. 1390), in which the narrator Dame Alisoun, in introducing the magical Arthurian setting of the tale, explains that "many hundred years ago" the land was full of fairies, though now such enchantment has been banished, due to the meddling of friars.¹ The medieval heroic literatures of northwest Europe routinely portray events many hundred years in the past. Thus, *Beowulf* (early eighth century? possibly ninth or tenth) begins not simply in the heroic past during the golden age of the glorious Scylding kings of Denmark but in the mythic origins of that dynasty, with the arrival and departure of Scyld ("Shield"), putatively the dynastic eponym, though certainly instead a fiction spawned by the name Scylding itself.² One reason the poet chose to begin with a substantial and otherwise seemingly irrelevant account of Scyld's funeral ship cast adrift is surely that it serves to express the irrecoverability of the lost world that Scyld inhabited, and thus to signal the distance that it is necessary to achieve when narrating a tale about encounters with monsters. Similarly, the poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ed. Andrew and Waldron 1978, trans. Boroff 1967), a contemporary of Chaucer, begins not directly with the enchanted court of King Arthur that is the setting of the tale but with Aeneas and a cycle of Italian founders of civilizations culminating in the arrival of Aeneas's fictitious great-grandson Brutus on British shores. The first line of the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied* puts the matter succinctly: "Uns ist in alten mæren wunders vil geseit" ("We are told many a wonder in old stories").³ In early

West Germanic literature, so integral is the connection between remoteness in time and the outsize ambitions of heroic narrative that exceptions to the rule, strikingly unusual in themselves, occur only late in the tradition.⁴

The fictionalizing function of history is particularly intriguing in connection with medieval Scandinavian (North Germanic) literature. This is a diverse corpus that is somewhat surprising in nature, not least because the works that most resemble epic are not the (often) early, mostly brief lays of the Poetic *Edda* (ninth to thirteenth centuries? Ed. Neckel 1983; trans. Terry 1990), about evenly divided in their devotion to ancient myth and heroic legend, but the much longer and later prose sagas (late twelfth to early fourteenth centuries) devoted chiefly to the history of the kings of Norway (*konunga sögur*), to the lives, and especially the feuds, of families in Iceland (*Íslendinga sögur*), and to ancient heroic legends (*fornaldar sögur*).⁵

It is in the last of these saga categories that antiquity plays the role closest to the one it plays in West Germanic heroic literature – to which, unsurprisingly, the *fornaldar sögur* are most closely related in content. Thus, the early chapters of the most important of these sagas, *Völsunga saga* (c. 1260–70; ed. Olsen 1906–8; trans. Anderson 1982), concern the hero Sigmundr and his family, who derive from West Germanic traditions. Yet the saga begins with Sigmundr's great-grandfather, who serves an archaizing purpose by his connection with Óðinn: “Hér hefur upp ok segir frá þeim manni, er Sigi er nefndr ok kallaðr, at heiti son Óðins” (“Here the story begins and tells about that person who is named and called Sigi, said to be a son of Óðinn”). The *fornaldar sögur* have received less critical attention than other saga varieties because their content is more fantastic. Thus, *Hrólfs saga kraka*, the saga of this sort known best after *Völsunga saga*, contains such supernatural elements as witches, elves, trolls, spells, and enchanted weapons. The connection between plausibility and temporal setting is thus neatly expressed by the term *fornaldar sögur* itself, meaning “sagas of ancient times.”

The past is treated with considerably more plausibility in the *Íslendinga sögur*. To be sure, the sagas are full of ghosts – not floating spirits but menacing and immensely strong walking corpses, generally of men who were in life of a malign temperament – that wreak havoc on farmers and their livestock. But fervent belief in ghosts is to this day not uncommon in Iceland. The sagas also contain sorcerers (always malicious), predictions of future events (almost always accurate), and various miracles, as in, for example, *Eyrbyggja saga* (chap. 52), in which a half-moon appears indoors nightly for a week, circling the sitting-room of a farm that is about to be haunted.⁶ But medieval Europeans believed in such things. Sorcerers were regarded as a public nuisance: under Icelandic law they were to be outlawed, and in the sagas they are not infrequently dispatched without the benefit of legal action.⁷ Prophecy is usually presented in the sagas not as a mystical power but as a consequence of natural wisdom, and the word for “prescient,” *spakr*, more generally means “wise.” The miracles related in the *Íslendinga sögur* are often like the sort found in the pious *postula sögur* (*Lives of the Apostles*) and *heilagra manna sögur* (*Lives of Saints*), and saga characters not infrequently thank God when one occurs. It is true that miracles also sometimes occur in narratives set in heathen times,

sometimes explicitly in connection with pagan gods and their devotees. But in medieval times the Church taught that the Northern gods were devils, and of course medieval Christians believed as fervently in devils and their works as in saints and theirs. All in all, then, the superhuman ability of saga heroes to triumph against superior forces must have seemed to saga audiences more marvelous than any of these frankly supernatural elements.

Yet in the *Íslendinga sögur* there is still to be found a remarkable relation between narrative plausibility and the invocation of history. These works generally narrate events of the century 930–1030, and thus antecede the composition of the sagas by at least 200 years. But the sagas almost routinely begin even further back in time, with the settlers of Iceland, who arrived in the period 870–930. These lend the sagas a particular air of historicity, since many Icelanders of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries could trace their ancestry back to the settlers. Indeed, medieval Icelanders' fascination with the settlers is attested by the fact that two of the earliest surviving Icelandic prose texts, *Íslendingabók* ("Book of Icelanders") and *Landnámabók* ("Book of Settlements"), whose earliest redactions must have been made in the early twelfth century, are devoted to them.⁸ But because they were founders of the nation and remote in time, it is almost inevitable that the settlers should have been in some ways mythologized. This is the case, for example, in the one saga that is centered chiefly on the portrayal of women, and the one with the most Celtic elements, *Laxdæla saga* (Íslensk Fornrit 5 [1934]; trans. Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson 1969), which is devoted mostly to the life of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and her four husbands – none of whom was, according to the saga, the man she actually loved. The saga begins not with Guðrún, who lived in the years before and after the millennium, but with her great-great-great-grandfather Ketill, and then it soon focuses on his strong-willed daughter Unnr in djúpúðga ("Unnr the Deep-Minded," elsewhere called Auðr rather than Unnr), one of the earliest settlers of Iceland (chaps. 4–7). Unnr's chief function in the narrative is to affirm the saga's vision of the role of powerful women in Icelandic history and society. She is portrayed as the progenitor of great families, for on the way to Iceland she strategically marries off her daughters, from whom are said to spring the greatest families of the Orkneys and the Faroe Islands. Likewise, she takes with her to Iceland a large retinue of capable men, and of the huge tract of land in Iceland to which she lays claim, she distributes parcels to her retainers and her freed servants. In evidence of the saga's claims on this score it deploys onomastics, writing history on the landscape. Thus the place-names Sökkólfssdalr, Hundadalr, Vífilsdalr and (by implication) Erpsstaðir are said to derive from the names of four of her freed slaves. All of this information in fact derives from *Landnámabók*, where its purpose is historical: to record how the land was settled (Íslensk Fornrit 1: 141–2). In *Laxdæla saga* its purpose is rather different: to illustrate the wealth and power of Unnr. The saga writer seems to have known practically nothing else about Unnr's life in Iceland,⁹ but place-names speak when history is silent. Upon her arrival in the area of Iceland she was to settle, the saga tells us, she went ashore at a promontory where she ate breakfast, and it has ever since been called Dögurðarnes ("Cape Breakfast");

alighting at another promontory, she lost her comb there, and ever since it has been called Kambsnes (“Cape Comb”). Such specious details contribute nothing to the progress of the narrative, but it must have seemed safe enough to ascribe to her local place-names in the area she settled. The saga audience’s knowledge of local place names thus would have served to affirm the truth of the saga narrative.

Dating events in the sagas with precision is notoriously difficult, since the works rarely refer to independently verifiable events outside of Scandinavia. This was in fact already a problem for the first Icelandic historians, as Ari Porgilsson (1068–1148) in his *Íslendingabók* was obliged to rely heavily upon the death of St Edmund, King of East Anglia, as an event fixed in time on which to base the chronology that he constructed for the settlement of Iceland, since the king’s martyrdom, mentioned in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, is dated 870 in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (e.g., Ólafía Einarisdóttir 1964). In *Njáls saga*, the greatest of the *Íslendinga sögur*, the one datable event that occurs outside Scandinavia is the battle of Clontarf, in which Brian Boru, high king of Ireland, defeated a coalition of Vikings and rebellious Irish forces near Dublin on Good Friday (April 23), 1014 CE.¹⁰ Yet the function of the battle in the saga is not to locate the events of the saga within European history. Quite to the contrary, its function is mystical and apocalyptic. One purpose it serves is to wreak God’s vengeance upon those responsible for the cowardly burning of the saga’s hero Njáll and his family in their home, for 15 of the burners die at Clontarf.¹¹ But coming at the very close of the saga, it is also the occasion for a fiercely concentrated series of miracles and visions such as are indulged in only sparsely in preceding chapters. The most memorable of these (in chap. 157) is the grisly vision of an otherwise unknown man by the name of Dǫrruðr. On Good Friday morning in Caithness he sees people riding to a women’s bower, and when he follows and looks in through a window, he sees women – Valkyries, it becomes evident – weaving at a loom on which the weights are men’s heads, the warp and weft are men’s entrails, the beater is a sword, and the shuttle an arrow. They chant dire, prophetic verses about battle in Ireland, saying it is now horrible to look about, since the heavens are overcast with clouds of gore. Then they rip the cloth apart, each taking a piece and riding away, six to the south and six to the north. The same vision is said to have befallen a man in the Faroe Islands. The cosmic background against which the battle is set thus invites us to think of Clontarf as an apocalyptic confrontation in the war between heaven and hell, and indeed, several aspects of the narrative reinforce this impression, including the killing of King Brian as divine retribution for allowing the battle to take place on Good Friday (though he was too pious to wield weapons himself that day), a vision seen by a fleeing Viking leader of devils preparing to receive him in hell, and the horrible, slow gutting of another Viking leader who is an apostate from Christianity and a sorcerer. Coming just a few years after the conversion of Norway and Iceland to Christianity, the battle in one sense marks the crumbling of the old pagan order. And so in *Njáls saga* we see history deployed not as a background of fact lending verisimilitude to the world of the saga, reinforcing the plausibility of its imaginatively recreated dialogue and character types, but as an expression of the workings of divine providence in human affairs.

By the newly converted in medieval northwest Europe, history does indeed seem to have been perceived as God's great design for the human race. Modern historians tend to speak well of the Venerable Bede (c. 673–735) for the objectivity of the historiographic method of his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* ("Ecclesiastical History of the Nation of the English," ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors 1969), perceiving in him a kindred spirit. But Bede's aim in his great work is not so much to preserve knowledge of the past as to construct for his countrymen a place of prominence within the wider Christian community. His means of achieving this was to narrate the successes of the faith in the north on a scale comparable to its successes in the Mediterranean world. It is because of this larger aim that his history is replete with miracles and the visions of holy persons: such wonders prove the sanctity of God's champions among the Angles and the Saxons and thus the favor of God for the English mission. Against the backdrop of such a view of history as a divine plan for human salvation, it is hardly surprising that a work such as *Njáls saga* should culminate as it does in the battle of Clontarf.

Christian belief is the element that most broadly distinguishes European medieval from ancient heroic literature, for it is pervasive and both openly and subtly consequential. The truth of this observation may not always be obvious in regard to the traditions of medieval Scandinavia, because so much of this literature is set in pre-Christian times. But those who recorded this literature were themselves believers, and their beliefs inevitably color in remarkable ways their understanding of events. Thus, for example, in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* ("The Saga of Hrafnkell, Priest of Freyr"), set before the Conversion, the protagonist Hrafnkell foolishly kills a hapless hired hand as the consequence of an oath he had made to the god Freyr (Íslensk Fornrit 11 [1950]; trans. Hermann Pálsson 1971). He suffers dire consequences, but with hard work he achieves renewal, and the saga writer's plainest indication that the hero has put aside past foolishness and achieved wisdom is to have him renounce belief in the old gods (called the *Æsir* and the *Vanir*).

Similarly, *Völuspá* ("The Sybil's Prophecy," c. 1000 CE) in the Poetic *Edda*, relating the past, present, and future of the gods, presents itself as distinctly pagan in outlook. Yet scholars are generally in agreement that the influence of Christian belief is to be found in the poem, in its "moral framework, the idea of punishment or reward for human beings after death, the coming of *inn ríki* ('the mighty one' [a Christ figure]), and obsession with the end of the world" (McKinnell 1993: 714). Viewed in this light, the beginning of the poem asserts its pagan outlook too vigorously not to raise the suspicion of some dissimulation:

I beg a hearing from all holy beings, greater and lesser, sons of Heimdallr [i.e., men];
do you wish, father-of-the-slain [i.e., Óðinn], that I recite well the old tales of men,
those which I remember from furthest back? I know of giants born of yore, those
which raised me.

Yet even if the poet's paganism should be regarded as genuine, it is notable that in this passage, as elsewhere, heathen beliefs are evoked precisely for the purpose of establishing an air of historical depth.

Despite such unabashed – and often sympathetic – portrayals of pagan belief, the attitudes expressed tend to be less permissive when pagan and Christian beliefs clash. This is perhaps nowhere plainer than in the portrayal of religious matters in connection with the life of King Hákon Haraldsson of Norway. The most expansive of the sources is *Hákonar saga góða* (“The Saga of Hákon the Good”) in Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla* (c. 1230; ÍF 26–8, 1941–51; trans. Hollander 1964), though similar information is to be found in some earlier sources, *Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sögum* (“Summary of the Sagas of the Kings of Norway,” c. 1190? – the manuscript is from the first half of the thirteenth century) and the text called *Fagrskinna* (“Beautiful Parchment,” c. 1220)¹² after the manuscript in which it is preserved; it is not unlikely that all three depend on a lost work by Ari Þorgilsson called *Ættartala ok konunga ævi* (“Genealogies and Life of Kings”). Snorri tells us that Hákon, raised a Christian in England, attempted to impose Christianity on Norway when he became king, but the attempt was firmly resisted by his countrymen. To the contrary, despite some clever escapes, they forced him ultimately to participate in heathen rites, including drinking a toast dedicated to Óðinn and consuming horse-flesh (chaps. 17–18). It is quite likely that Ari (if he was Snorri’s source), writing more than 150 years after Hákon’s death, invented these circumstances merely to explain why Norway did not convert to Christianity during the reign of a king raised at a Christian court. After all, the chief method of composition for saga-writers was to interpret old poems of the court skalds, handed down in oral tradition, guessing at the historical circumstances of their composition, and then citing the stanzas themselves in evidence of the truth of the saga. This is made evident by the very many instances in which saga-writers, including Snorri, have plainly misinterpreted the stanzas they quote and have composed prose in accordance with such misinterpretations.¹³

Similar invention on the part of Snorri and his prose source is detectable at the end of this saga, when there is described the burial of Hákon in a heathen mound, whereupon his people “spoke such words over his burial-place as it was heathens’ custom to speak, and they sent him on his way to Valhøll [Óðinn’s hall]” (Snorri, chap. 32). The saga writer was obliged to recount this bit of pagan practice because his source, Eyvindr Skáldaspillir’s poem *Hákonarmál*, describes Hákon riding to Valhøll after his death from wounds received in battle, and it says that the gods received him gladly because he had honored their shrines while alive. To the best of his ability Snorri manages, however, to absolve Hákon of the scandal of apostasy, first, by asserting that before he died, the king said that if he lived, he would go to live among Christians and do penance, but otherwise his countrymen might dispose of his remains in whatever manner they saw fit, and second, by maintaining that although he was buried in his armor, no grave goods (such as heathens send with the departed into the afterlife) were deposited in the mound. The former point, at least, may be Snorri’s own invention, as *Ágrip* (chap. 6) tells us instead that before his death, Hákon’s friends offered to have his body buried in a churchyard in England, but he declined the offer, thinking himself unworthy, since he had lived so much as heathens do. The latter point, however, is confirmed by *Ágrip*, and regardless of whether it is a fiction (of Ari’s?), its sanitizing purpose in the narrative is plain.

Such reticence on Snorri's part as regards pagan practices may seem surprising to those who know him primarily as the author of the Prose *Edda* (ed. Faulkes 1982–98; trans. Faulkes 1987), in which he explains in great detail, and with apparent delight, the myths of pagan Scandinavia. No doubt these myths did delight him, but modern readers, whose interest in them is chiefly of a literary or anthropological nature, tend to assume Snorri regarded them the same way. To the contrary, Snorri was first and foremost a historian, and for him they had an eminently functional historiographic purpose. Since skaldic poetry was the historian's chief source of reliable information about early Scandinavian history, and since an accurate understanding of skaldic verse depends upon knowledge of mythology, due to the pervasive use of kennings (poetic circumlocutions) that allude to myths and the characters in them, Snorri's *Edda* is constructed as a guide to the interpretation of kennings. This is why the section called *Gylfaginning*, a narrative of some of the chief myths and the only portion of intense interest to most general readers today, is joined to *Skáldskaparmál*, which is a compendium of poetic diction, with occasional explication of the myths that underlie it, and *Háttatal*, an account of verse forms and poetic technical terminology. Thus, it is certainly true that Snorri's attitude toward pagan beliefs was relatively tolerant – he plainly did not feel threatened by them in the same way his newly converted ancestors had, 200 years previously – and yet it must not be supposed that his attitude was quite modern, either, since he does reveal some reticence when the fate of Christian souls is in question.

Pagan gods and pagan practices are alluded to only very rarely in the corpus of Old English literature, and they are never portrayed with anything like indulgence. The dearth of reference is most likely a gauge of how threatening paganism was, because the literature was composed either early, when the Conversion was still recent, or later, after the beginning of the Viking onslaught, when the English found themselves surrounded by hostile pagans.¹⁴ Thus, the only reference to paganism in Old English that would appear to serve a historicizing function is the passage in *Beowulf*, beginning at line 175, discussed in this volume by Geoffrey Russom. A similar historicizing impulse lies behind a passage in the early Middle English *Brut* of Laȝamon (c. 1200; ed. Brook and Leslie 1963, ll. 6936–55) in which Hengest, the Germanic chieftain invited by the British king Vortigern to defend his people against the Picts, describes the gods that his people worship, including not just Woden, Frea, and Þunor (Old English names corresponding to Old Icelandic Óðinn, Freyr, and Þórr), but also Phoebus, Saturn, Jupiter, Mercury, Venus, Tervagant (!), and others. Vortigern, having no idea that in inviting these mercenaries to Britain he is precipitating a full-scale Germanic invasion, is shocked that they do not worship Christ.

The situation is different again, however, in medieval Irish saga. Here the old gods are neither suppressed nor generally acknowledged as deities, but they are turned either into fairy folk or into human heroes, albeit with supernatural qualities. It is a commonplace of the literature¹⁵ that in very ancient times the governing race in Ireland was the Tuatha Dé Danann ("Peoples of the Goddess Danu"). They were displaced by invaders from Iberia and compelled to live literally underground,

inhabiting elf mounds (*síða*, sing. *síd*; hence the people themselves are called *síde*, “fairy folk”), which often take the form of prehistoric megalithic structures ((*síd*)*bruigi*, sing. (*síd*)*bruig*). The name of the tribe itself indicates association with the old deities, and some of the individuals of the tribe bear deific names, most notably their king the Dagda (“Good god”). Others are identifiable on an etymological basis, for example Lug, corresponding to the continental Celtic god Lugos, after whom Lyon, Leiden, and Liegnitz are named. They also retain certain powers of a magical variety, such as the ability to turn themselves into swans or other animals, and they frequently interfere in human affairs and produce human offspring to whom they provide assistance. Yet there is never mention of their being worshiped as deities, as the Scandinavian gods are openly acknowledged to have been. It is difficult to determine whether this is because of the religious impropriety or because the etiology of such figures really had passed from memory. It does appear likely, however, that at least by the time the surviving Irish sagas were committed to parchment, the *síde* had no greater association with paganism than did, for example, the elves, dwarfs, and *ēs* (= Old Icelandic *Æsir*) of Anglo-Saxon culture, which were regarded as the cause of various diseases, for which cures were prescribed in sober medical texts.¹⁶ As in Old Norse/Old Icelandic sagas, medieval Irish prose quotes much old verse that is apparently the source of some of the prose – though there is more independence of the prose from the verse in Irish literature because storytelling in prose was an ancient oral art practiced and preserved by the *filid* (poets and historians).¹⁷ And because early Irish poetry does not involve obscure mythological allusions, there was no need for a key to its interpretation comparable to the Prose *Edda*.

The heroic literature of Ireland contains some fainter traces of the old deities. Heroes are not infrequently said to be the sons of members of the *síde*, for example Cú Chulainn, the hero of the chief epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (“The Cattle-Raid of Cooley”), whose father is alternately made out to be Lug or the mortal Sualtam; and Lóeg, Cú Chulainn’s charioteer, is the son of the elf-chieftain Riangabar, as are the charioteers of some other Ulster heroes. Etymology once again provides some indicators, as well. The names of the owners of the chief *bruinne* (“hostels”) at which the kings and heroes were entertained, and at which much of the action of the sagas is set, contain the word *Da*, as in *Da Derga*, *Da Coca*, *Mac Da Réo*, and *Mac Da Thó* (or *Tó*). The *filid* interpreted the word to be a form of *dá* (“two”), and hence, for example, the name *Da Derga* (“Two Reds”) has inspired an incident in *Togail Bruinne Da Derga* (“The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel,” ed. Knott 1936; trans. Gantz 1981: 60–106) in which the doomed High King of Ireland, Conaire Mór (“Conaire the Great”), is preceded to Da Derga’s hostel by three (oddly, rather than two) men who are entirely red, even their teeth and their horses. It is plain from the story, however, that Da Derga, the owner of the hostel, is a single person, and the attachment of the word to so many names of this sort seems rather remarkable if it really means “two.” Rather, the most plausible explanation is that *Da* is a reduced form (unstressed in pretonic position) of *día*, meaning “god” (O’Rahilly 1946: 127–9). Similarly, it is remarkable that a number of figures have

the word *cú* (“dog”) as part of their name, including two of the best-known heroes, *Cú Chulainn* and *Cú Roí mac Dáiri*. In the sagas the names are rationalized: hence, for example, *Sétanta* killed the hound of the smith *Culann* and was therefore obliged to assume its duties as watch-dog, and that is why his name became *Cú Chulainn* (“Hound of Culann”). More likely, *Cú* indicates a canine hypostasis of a deity, for there is abundant evidence of the Celtic gods’ shape-shifting in the form of animals (O’Rahilly 1946: 79, 321; Rees and Rees 1961: 138–9; Greene 1968: 103). Even the culminating incident in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, the mortal combat between Ailill’s bull Whitehorn and the Black Bull of Cooley, has been identified as the remnant of a myth of combat between bull-gods (Greene 1968: 95).

The advent of Christianity, which is reputed to have been introduced by St Patrick in the fifth century, is a historicizing element in the saga literature of Ireland. There are few explicitly pagan features in the literature, the most familiar being a common oath uttered by the heroes, *tongu do dúa toinges mo thúath* (“I swear by the gods my people swear by”: see Ó hUiginn 1989). Rather, as in the literature of Iceland, most events are implicitly dated before the Conversion by the absence of Christian figures and Christian worship. This is particularly true of the Ulster cycle of sagas (to which the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* belongs), concerning King Conchobar of Ulster and his champions, continually at war with King Ailill and Queen Medb of Connacht. Antiquarian writers of the Middle Ages dated the events of the Ulster cycle to the first century BCE.¹⁸ The Fenian cycle, however, concerning Finn mac Cumall and his war-band, is traditionally assigned to the third century CE, though the chief work of the cycle, *Acallam na Senórach* (“The Colloquy of the Old Men,” ed. and trans. O’Grady 1892), is set at a later date, when the last survivors of Finn’s band converse with St Patrick about their heyday, and they convey much onomastic lore about the Irish countryside. The works of another, looser group, the historical cycles, represent events supposed to have occurred as early as the third century BCE and as late as the eleventh CE, and the best-known story, *Buile Suibne* (“The Madness of Sweeney,” ed. and trans. O’Keeffe 1913) is again historicized by Christian elements, since Sweeney’s madness stems from his ill treatment of the missionary St Rónán (fl. c. 600).

The medieval Irish were themselves quite interested in locating the events of their ancient tales within a larger historical framework. The *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (“Book of the Taking of Ireland,” better known as the *Book of Invasions*, ed. and trans. Macalister 1938–56), compiled in the eleventh century as an amalgamation of native poems and Latin histories from the Mediterranean world (particularly Orosius and Eusebius), is a fanciful attempt to place ancient legends about Gaelic and pre-Celtic invaders of Ireland within the context of biblical history, beginning with Genesis and ending with rolls of Irish kings who reigned before and after the introduction of Christianity. A very popular work, until the seventeenth century in Ireland it was regarded as factual. There exist also several detailed sets of annals deriving from an unpreserved chronicle (but reconstructed: trans. Charles-Edwards 2006), comprising chiefly obituaries, recording Irish history from the year 432 to 911 CE.

Descriptions of cultural practices can be another historicizing element. This is particularly true of the Ulster cycle, in which the champions roam the countryside in wheeled chariots. The use of chariots by Celts on the continent is remarked by Greek and Roman commentators, but their use had fallen out of favor before the first century BCE, when Caesar was surprised to encounter them during his forays into southern Britain. Their use continued in parts of Britain as late as the third century CE.¹⁹ They were in use in Ireland until at least the ninth century, when they are depicted in both annals and stone carving;²⁰ yet their function primarily as war wagons in the Ulster cycle surely reflects a mode of warfare that had passed out of use well before that time. The cycle is historically accurate in lacking any reference to bows and arrows used as weapons, as the archaeological evidence shows that their use among the early Celts was quite rare, the very words for such in Irish being late borrowings (see Jackson 1964: 16, 32–3). The Ulster cycle also makes frequent mention of druids. They are sometimes objects of fun, like the two silly watch-wizards who, in *Mesca Ulad* (“The Intoxication of the Ulstermen,” ed. Watson 1941; trans. Gantz 1981: 188–218), stand upon the walls of the fortress Temair Lúachra (Tara, not to be confused with Tara in County Meath) and dispute what it is they are watching as the host of the enemy Ulstermen approaches, then dive off in a panic, on opposite sides of the wall, when there can be no further doubt. But druids can also be revered figures, as is the case with Cathbad, High Druid of Ulster, who in the same work is called *degamra* (“most excellent”) and who must speak before even the king may speak. Yet druids, historically, because of their firm opposition to Christianity, faded from view with the Conversion (Lewis 1992: 17–18), and so mention of them in the sagas is a set antiquarianism. The political situation described in the Ulster cycle, with Ireland divided into five provinces, including a large and powerful Ulster, certainly antedates the fifth century (Jackson 1964: 47–8).

The historicity of certain cultural practices may also be supported by the witness of Greek and Roman writers who comment on the Celts, chiefly Caesar, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, and Athenaeus, probably in reliance on lost work by Posidonius. A striking example concerns *Scéla Mucce Meic Da Thó* (“The Story of Mac Da Thó’s Pig”). The central portion of the story is a protracted debate between the heroes of Ulster and Connacht about which of them is to carve the pig at a feast and thus receive the *curatmír* (“champion’s portion”). Cet mac Mágach of Connacht shames each of his challengers in turn, recounting their past defeats, until Conall Cernach of Ulster enters, and Cet is obliged to concede that he is the greater warrior. Cet says that he regrets that the champion Anlúan of Connacht (his brother, by some accounts) is not present, as then the contest would have turned out differently. “Oh, but he is here,” says Conall, and taking Anlúan’s head from his belt, he hurls it at Cet. The story has a literary veneer and projects ironic humor throughout, and so it is striking to find analogues to some of the tale’s seemingly more fanciful aspects in what the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, in his *Library of History* (first century BCE), has to say about the practices of the Gauls and their warriors:

They honor the brave men with the finest portions of the meat. . . . And they are accustomed even at dinner to make any slight matter an occasion for conflict, followed by a challenge to single combat between them, without any fear of ending their life. . . . And whenever someone complies with the challenge, they sing the praises of their ancestors' manly deeds and proclaim their own prowess, and they deride and disparage their opponent, and with these words they deprive him altogether of boldness of spirit beforehand. (5.29–30)

Welsh, like Irish, is a Celtic language, and medieval Welsh literature, in addition to being genetically related, may well show some direct Irish influence, as there is abundant epigraphic evidence of an Irish presence in Wales in the early centuries of the present era. In many ways, the Welsh literary works that show the greatest affinities to Irish saga are the four branches of the *Mabinogi* (ed. Williams 1930; trans. Ford 1977), composed perhaps c. 1100 (though there is much controversy: see Charles-Edwards 1970). Although they display few of the heroic qualities of the Ulster cycle, they share its ironic sense of humor and its mixture of natural and supernatural elements, and as a consequence, they have a fairy-tale-like quality. There are some striking mythic parallels between the *Mabinogi* and Irish saga. In the second branch of the *Mabinogi*, called *Branwen Uerch Lyr* ("Branwen Daughter of Llŷr"), in a battle between Britons and Irishmen, the Irish place their dead in a cauldron (which originally belonged to the British King Brân) and kindle a fire under it, and in the morning the dead emerge to fight again, though they cannot speak. A similar story appears to be depicted graphically on one panel of the Gundestrup Cauldron, a Celtic ceremonial silver artifact of the second or first century BCE, found in a bog in Denmark. One researcher has ventured to maintain even that the various panels of the cauldron narrate a Gaulish version of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.²¹

There is no precise parallel in Irish literature, in which magical cauldrons play a prominent role, but among several close approximations there is in the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* an account of the second battle of Mag Tured (Moytura), in which the warriors of the Túatha Dé Danann are resurrected not in a cauldron but in a well. In addition, in the *Mabinogi* certain characters are almost certainly derived from earlier myths, particularly the figure Rhiannon, who is constantly associated with horses and appears to be an analogue to the most widely worshiped Gaulish goddess, Epona (*Ep-* = Latin *Equ-*). A remarkable feature of the *Mabinogi* is the work's apparent timelessness. On the one hand, the collection portrays a Britain that appears to antedate the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons, since characters move freely about the island, for example to Oxford, London, and Kent, the last said to be ruled by Caswallon, that is, Cassivellaunus, the British chieftain who was the chief opponent of Caesar during his second expedition to Britain in 54 BCE. On the other hand, the material culture described is a late medieval one, with castles, city craftsmen, and bishops traveling with their retinues. In this respect it is quite unlike Irish literature, and its dissociation from a particular time and place is more reminiscent of the displacement of heroic literature from the here and now mentioned in the opening of this essay.

The most heroic composition in a Celtic language is the early Welsh or Cumbric poem *Y Gododdin* (ed. Williams 1938; ed. and trans. Jarman 1988), in about 100 stanzas. The title refers to the late British kingdom of the *Votadini* that extended from the head of the Firth of Forth southward, encompassing modern Lothian and Edinburgh, and extending as far as the Wear in County Durham. The poem is a celebration of the 300 (or 363) cavalry (and perhaps many more infantry, though none are mentioned), about 80 of them named, usually one to a stanza, who accompanied Mynyddog Mwynfawr, lord of Din Eidyn (Edinburgh), in an attack on Anglo-Saxon forces of Deira (and Bernicia?) at Catraeth (Catterick, Latin Cataractonium, on the Swale in North Yorkshire) in an engagement usually dated c. 600. According to the poem, Mynyddog feasted the men for a year before they set out, and thus each *med a dalhei* (“repaid his mead”) with loyalty: just one (or three) of the British men (excluding the poet, Aneirin) returned from the encounter. The poem thus shares some prominent features with literatures of other heroic cultures, with its emphasis on loyalty, self-sacrifice, and earning lasting fame. The poem is in no sense epic, however, being a blend of panegyric and elegy.

There has been considerable controversy about the authenticity of the poem, as it purports to concern events that antedate the manuscript in which it is recorded by more than six centuries. The name of the poet is authentic, as he is mentioned in the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*, though in a context that would suggest he lived in the middle years of the sixth century, not at the end of it. The poem displays some unusual linguistic features that are most plausibly explained as archaic, but the language has plainly been modernized to a great extent. It could be a literary fiction; certainly, for example, the Middle Welsh poems concerning the sixth-century prince Llywarch Hen (ed. and trans. Ford 1974) purport to be spoken by him, and yet the oldest stratum among the poems must be dated rather to the ninth century (see Jarman 1992). But as regards *Y Gododdin*, it is difficult to perceive whom it would have benefited to have fabricated a poem preserved in Welsh but having almost nothing to do with Wales, as nearly all the British warriors came from areas in what subsequently became Scotland and northern England. There is also an apparent allusion to the poem in a composition of the seventh century that seems to be authentic (Jarman 1988: lxviii–lxxv and xciv, with references). And so most scholars now agree that, aside from a few later accretions, the material does stem from the sixth or early seventh century – though Dumville (1988) argues with reason that this near-consensus lacks any very solid foundation. At all events, the poem must have been transmitted orally for some time before it was committed to parchment. (If the material really is so old, it should be said, it contains the earliest known reference to Arthur, to whom the warrior Gwawrddur is compared: “gochore brein du ar uur / caer ceni bei ef arthur” [“He sated black ravens on the wall of a fortress, though he was no Arthur”].)

The problems associated with dating *Y Gododdin* have many commonalities with dating problems in regard to the other literatures of northwest Europe, involving, among other things, uncertainties about the relation of oral to literate textual production, the deliberate antiquarianism inherent in heroic genres, and a certain

circularity of reasoning that results from a dearth of reliable historical evidence independent of heroic literature itself. Part of the problem is perspectival: early medieval cultures did not for the most part draw the sharp distinction between history and epic that we do, but they regarded epic as a witness to history, and all the more so the earlier the events concerned. It is not of course the case that there are no reliable historical records of the early Middle Ages; but the more reliable they appear to be, the less light they usually shed on the relation between historical fact and heroic literature. It is interesting to note, however, that while date of composition and historicity are inextricably interconnected problems in regard to most of this body of literature, they hardly bear any relation to each other in regard to *Y Gododdin*. Whether, for example, we are to place trust in the prose of Snorri Sturluson's history of the kings of Norway depends to a great extent on whether we assume sagas of the kings to have been transmitted orally beginning in the ninth century or whether we assume that Snorri had little information independent of his known sources, especially skaldic verse – that is, whether the prose of *Heimskringla* is essentially a product of Snorri's own lifetime or of several centuries earlier.²² To the contrary, touching all matters of facticity, it hardly matters whether *Y Gododdin* was composed in the sixth century or the ninth, or even later: proving the work a later fabrication would disprove essentially nothing about the historical information that the poem conveys. The relative inconsequentiality of the question is thus one of the strongest reasons to believe that the poem is what it portrays itself to be. At least at this historical remove, it is impossible to identify any concrete way in which such a fiction would have served anyone's historical or political purposes.

Thus, although many of the medieval cultures of northwestern Europe faced similar pressures and underwent comparable transformations from pagan, oral cultures to Christian, literate ones, their heroic literatures developed in notably different ways. Although Ireland and Wales both developed vigorous literary traditions in prose, that prose was the vehicle for heroic literature only in Ireland; in Wales only the oldest poetry may truly be called heroic. The difference is surely to be ascribed in part to historical circumstances, chiefly the conquest of most of Britain by the Anglo-Saxons, while Ireland remained intact. The Heroic Age of Wales thus came to be intimately connected to national identity, which was to a great extent defined in opposition to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (Sims-Williams 1985), while in Ireland the absence of any such national catastrophe permitted a more detached, ironic view of the Heroic Age. As regards Anglo-Saxon England, heroic poetry on an epic scale was still appreciated at the millennium, but the poetic form that it retained had certain consequences. Presumably the poetry continued to be performed in the ancient manner as the primary means of recalling great ancestral deeds, and thus because it served to maintain the code of martial obligations on which Anglo-Saxon society depended for its existence (unlike the often ironized Irish prose sagas and the magical Welsh *Mabinogi*), it demanded a less permissive attitude toward the transmission of pagan lore, which otherwise threatened to taint the legitimacy of heroic literature in a Christian age.

Viewed in this context, Scandinavian heroic literature of the Middle Ages looks decidedly unusual. There developed a literary prose tradition, but the inherited heroic poetry was also preserved, with remarkably little overlap in content, and, in either genre, little of the reserve shown by Anglo-Saxons as regards heathen content. The historical and cultural circumstances that enabled the rise of a tradition of heroic prose in Scandinavia but not in Anglo-Saxon England are of particular interest. The most literary of the sagas, the *Íslendinga sögur*, are a tertiary or quaternary development, inspired by the sagas of the Norwegian kings; and royal biographies, beginning with Einhard's life of Charlemagne, in turn take their inspiration from the lives of saints, which primarily served not a historical but a liturgical purpose, since they were read in religious houses on the vigils of saints' feasts. What made the lives of the Norwegian kings possible, however, were the particular historical circumstances that gave rise to the institution of skaldic panegyric, for without the praise poetry of the court poets, the later royal biographers would have lacked most of the information about the early kings on which the *konunga sögur* are based. Yet the institution and transmission of skaldic poetry were themselves due to particular historical circumstances that now seem rather precarious. Despite some fictionalized accounts in the sagas, we do not know how well Norwegian kings understood the poetry composed about them. Comprehension would have required an understanding of often complex kennings made even more obscure by the knotty syntax that the strict metrical, alliterative, and rhyming requirements of the form demanded. It is, after all, possible that skaldic verse was in the eyes of those rulers for whom it was composed more a status symbol than a living and comprehensible art form.

The possibility that this was the case is increased by another consideration, the changing nature of the Norwegian language during and after the Viking Age. It is no doubt because of the relative stability of Icelandic (as opposed to Norwegian), which maintained the old inflectional endings (and the qualities of unstressed vowels), and thus the complex, variable syntax enabled by those endings, that after the tenth century, the court poets in Norway were all Icelanders.²³ Blessed with the linguistic stability that Icelandic society afforded in this period, Icelanders came to be the living repository both of Norwegian history and of the memory of Norwegian kings living and ancient. Icelanders came to be not only the sole persons capable of composing in this genre and immortalizing present monarchs; they were also the sole persons in whom rested extensive knowledge of the deeds of royal ancestors, empowered as the poets were by their ability to transmit remembered verses of the great skalds of former times. They were also the conduit through which Eddic poetry was transmitted, which was both the genre out of which the skaldic meters grew and the key to understanding the complex mythological kennings of the court skalds.

The path leading from the primary heroic genre, Eddic poetry, to the secondary one, the sagas, is thus a circuitous one, but one that can be traced with some degree of historical probability. What is most interesting about the connection is the variety of precarious historical circumstances on which it rests, not least of which is the set of cultural circumstances dictating that Icelandic should have evolved very little as a language during this period, while Norwegian followed the pattern of most

European vernaculars and lost the richness of its inflectional system and thus a great deal of the variability in its syntax. The consequence was not only a rich, complex poetic genre in Icelandic – skaldic verse – but also a historical variety of prose derived from examples of that poetic genre preserved by oral transmission.

It should be apparent from this brief overview of the heroic literatures of medieval Scandinavia and neighboring cultures (if these may be referred to loosely as “epic”) that, as in the literatures of the ancient world, the relation between epic and history is by no means simple or uniform. It would be a mistake to approach these texts with the attitude that Heinrich Schliemann brought to Homer: they obviously are in many ways counterfactual. Yet it would be wrong, too, to suppose that they offer no reliable glimpses of history and, especially, prehistory. Even though the sagas were for the most part composed long after the events they purport to narrate, they contain elements of reliable traditional lore embedded in them like the stones of ruined ancient monuments re-used and embedded in medieval walls. For those who composed our extant texts were faced with much the same problem we face in approaching their compositions: how to make sense of inherited material whose meaning has been obscured by age. What may seem to us falsification of history, as with Snorri’s construction of spurious prose contexts for the composition of preserved skaldic verses, is different in degree rather than in aim from our own efforts to interpret the traditions in ways that make sense in the present moment.

Notes

- 1 The text is in Benson 1987: 116–22, here at 116–17. For detailed analysis, see Ingham 2002. Dame Alisoun’s point is to ridicule her fellow pilgrim the Friar, who has treated her rudely, but in the process she makes explicit the connection between antiquity and narrative plausibility.
- 2 Ed. Fulk et al. 2008. The translation of Donaldson (1966) is quite literal, while that of Heaney (1999) aims to capture the spirit more than the letter of the poem.
- 3 Ed. de Boor 1988, trans. Raffel 2006. Here and throughout, translations in the text are my own.
- 4 The two most notable exceptions are in Old English: *The Battle of Brunanburh* (composed no later than c. 955), describing events of 937, is unlike other early Germanic heroic poetry in that it is frankly nationalistic, crowing at the defeat of enemies rather than celebrating the valor of opposing forces. *The Battle of Maldon* (concerning events of 991 and probably composed not long thereafter), by its poetic form and its lack of allusions to heroic tradition, shows significant departures from the poetic tradition as practiced throughout the Old English period: see Fulk and Cain 2003: 220–4.
- 5 On these and other types of sagas, see especially Stefn Einarsson 1957; Hallberg 1962; Andersson 1967; and Clover and Lindow 1985. Also useful, especially for concise discussion of individual works, is Pulsiano 1993. Another important source for Scandinavian heroic legend is the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus (c. 1220; ed. Friis-Jensen 2005; trans. Davidson and Fisher 1979–80), based on Icelandic sagas, many of them now lost.

- 6 The best editions of the *Íslendinga sggur* are to be found in the series *Íslenzk Fornrit* (Reykjavík, 1933–). *Eyrbyggja saga* is in vol. 4 (1935). Translations of all the *Íslendinga sggur* are to be found conveniently in Viðar Hreinsson 1997.
- 7 In the early Icelandic code called *Grágás* (first committed to writing 1117–18, but about 1260 in the earliest surviving manuscript, *Konungsbók*, ed. Finsen 1852 [here at 22–3], trans. Dennis et al. 1980–2000), the lesser outlawry (of three years' duration) is the punishment prescribed for sorcerers, unless they have caused death or sickness to humans or animals, in which case full outlawry (permanent) is prescribed.
- 8 Both are edited in *Íslenzk Fornrit* 1 (1968); trans. Halldór Hermansson 1930 and Hermann Pálsson and Edwards 1972, respectively.
- 9 Aside from these onomastic details, we are given only an improbable account of how at an advanced age Unnr died with great dignity on the first night of a great wedding feast that she arranged for her son.
- 10 *Íslenzk Fornrit* 12 (1954). For a detailed argument that the material on the battle is of a piece with the rest of the saga and not wholly different in style, as some have supposed, see Lönnroth 1976: 226–36.
- 11 On the workings of God's justice in the saga, see Lönnroth 1976: 123–36.
- 12 Both edited in *ÍF* 29 (1984). The former is also edited and translated by Driscoll 1995, the latter by Finlay 2004.
- 13 For example, although various manuscripts of *Óláfs saga helga* ("The Saga of St Óláfr") quote the eleventh *lausavísa* (one-stanza poem) of Sighvatr Þórðarson in a context indicating that it was composed on the occasion of Óláfr's having stood sponsor at baptism to Sighvatr's daughter, Olsen (1954) shows convincingly that the poem can only have been composed years later, after Óláfr's death. Likewise there has been very extensive critical controversy about the rather unlikely assertions of Snorri concerning the route taken by Sighvatr on a journey to the east in (probably) 1019, and even the actual destination and purpose of the trip, since Snorri does not seem to have had any reliable information besides *Austrfararvísur*, the poem that Sighvatr composed about it (see, e.g., Weibull 1921: 118–20). An amusing example is the ninth *lausavísa* of Þórmóðr kolbrúnarskáld, which both the compiler of *Fóstbræðra saga* and modern scholars have interpreted to refer to a grin on the face of a half-naked drowned man, either because it would not have occurred to them or because the implication was too indecent if the grin was on another portion of his anatomy.
- 14 The last region of Anglo-Saxon Britain to be converted was Sussex, in the course of the decade 680–90, though there is some evidence for the continuation of some heathen practices in England into the early eighth century: see Hunter Blair 2003: 122. The Viking attacks grew fierce in the middle of the ninth century. When Ælfric (c. 1000) preaches against heathen gods, the names of the Germanic ones take their Scandinavian form: see Pope 1968, 683–6.
- 15 E.g., at the start of *Mesca Ulad* ("The Intoxication of the Ulstermen"), ed. Watson 1941: 6; trans. Gantz 1981: 190.
- 16 See, for example, the metrical charms *Against a Dwarf* and *For a Sudden Stitch*, ed. Dobbie 1942: 121–3; trans. Grendon 1909.
- 17 On the interaction of oral and literate influences on the preserved Irish sagas, see Carney 1955: 305–21.
- 18 This is, however, a conjecture, and Greene (1968: 96–7) points out that since Emain Macha, the capital of the Ulstermen, was not abandoned until the fourth century CE,

- whatever historical events underlie the cycle could have taken place several centuries later than medieval writers supposed.
- 19 On the archaeological record, see Raftery 1994: 104–11.
 - 20 On the annals, see Hemprich 2002; also Harbison 1992: vol. 2, fig. 17 on the depiction of a chariot on the Ahenny High Cross.
 - 21 Such is the argument of Olmsted 1979, with copious photographs of the cauldron's panels.
 - 22 On the so-called Freiprosas/Buchprosas controversy, see, e.g., Hallberg 1962: 49–69.
 - 23 Skaldic poetry on various topics, especially religious ones, continued to be composed by Icelanders until the sixteenth century, though the tradition of Icelandic skalds at the Norwegian court did not extend beyond the thirteenth.

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Traditional History in South Slavic Oral Epic

JOHN MILES FOLEY

Što misliš ti, Ibro – je li to istina u tijem pjesmama što se pjeva?

“What do you think, Ibro – is it the truth in these [epic] songs they sing?”

Nikola Vujnović (Parry and Lord’s co-fieldworker) to the *guslar*
Ibro Bašić (Milman Parry Collection, Parry no. 6598)¹

Oral epic and history have a complex relationship, made more complicated by our habit of understanding history as the yield of objective, discoverable fact. In simplest terms, oral epic has other concerns and responsibilities, and efforts to align its vision of the past with realities ascertained from other sources will inevitably produce major discrepancies. Since modern concepts of history endemically privilege the documentable, oral epic can only too easily fall victim to charges of inaccuracy, incompleteness, or even outright distortion.

The present contribution will attempt to turn the tables, to establish a counter-concept that I will call *traditional history*. That is, we will be examining exactly what it is that oral epic interprets and encodes as “the past” and how that vision informs ongoing cultural identity in important ways. In other words, we will begin not by privileging the usual historical perspective, but by inquiring into the dynamics behind and assumptions of an alternate point of view, in the end affirming that oral epic can and does present a viable, functional view of history in its own right and on its own terms.

The test case for our investigation will be the well-collected South Slavic oral epic, which persisted in the Balkans from approximately the eighth century CE through the first half of the twentieth century.² Additionally, this tradition has been intensively studied by generations of scholars, in recent times most prominently Matija Murko, Milman Parry, and Albert Lord; so we have rich evidence to draw from.³ The discussion will consist of five sections: (1) a prologue that features the South Slavic *guslari* (or epic singers) explaining what constitutes truth in their medium, (2) a morphology of oral epic in the Former Yugoslavia, (3) a consideration of the disparity between conventional history and traditional history, (4) a description of the cultural role of oral epic as a charter for group identity, and (5) a brief reflection on our culturally ingrained notion of “fact” and its contrast with the dynamic nature of truth in South Slavic oral epic tradition.

A Conversation with Ibro Bašić

Among the oral epic singers whom Parry, Lord, and Nikola Vujnović interviewed and recorded in 1933–5 was Ibro Bašić, a resident of the region of Stolac in central Hercegovina. Bašić gave the collectors some dozen performances as well as an account of his repertoire and an extended conversation, conducted by Vujnović, that covered various aspects of his life and times.⁴

The legendary singer

Prominent among the matters discussed was a topic that had emerged in earlier interviews and would continue to be an important focus of the collectors' fieldwork: this was the celebrated master-singer Isak, from whom many *guslari* traced their lineage as traditional epic singers. On this point Bašić was unequivocal: "Najbolji je u Hercegovini Isak bijo pjevač," he insisted; "Isak was the finest singer in Hercegovina." This prominent figure was naturally of great interest to Parry as he sought an analogue for that greatest of all ancient Greek *oidoi*, Homer.

When we gather together the portraits of the Bosnian master-*guslar* provided by multiple singers, a multiform pattern begins to emerge, a kind of generic biography that is personalized in various different ways.⁵ In other words, the pattern does not consist of a single set of verifiable details traceable to a flesh-and-blood person. At the simplest level, his very name changes from one account to the next (Isak, Huso, Ćor Huso, and so forth); similarly, he is claimed as a native son by a number of different villages and areas, and his repertoire, while always unrealistically huge, is never consistent from one report to another. Additionally, the master-singer is generously credited with impossible athletic or bardic feats, such as jumping ten paces at the age of 92, or defeating a robust and self-impressed challenger in a contest of epic singing (often while disguised as an everyday coffeehouse attendant, or *kalvedžija*), or performing so strikingly and memorably that men and women were allowed to mix at a Muslim wedding. Moreover, none of the *guslari* who describe this paragon – and take great pride in citing him as the ultimate source of their best songs – ever seems to have met him. Isak, or whatever he is called locally, was always traveling, or came from a previous generation, or lived in another village. Much remains indistinct or contradictory, and we search for a genuinely historical figure (in our usual sense) in vain.⁶

To put it more directly, the master-*guslar* seems to have been – and to have functioned as – a legend. Recognizable in his general outlines, he serves the oral epic tradition as a flexible figurehead that can be molded and appropriated to suit individual circumstances. As such, he appears to have provided an anthropomorphic embodiment of the oral epic tradition. That is, Isak or Huso or whatever he happens to be called by real-life *guslari* operates in the same way as the epics they compose and perform: his characterization varies within limits, providing a ready strategy for

describing the indescribable by tailoring a generic pattern to a particular purpose. From that point of view, his “instability” across varying biographies is the plastic strength that allows the individual singer to mold the tradition, and in the process to provide for himself a lineage that melds together universal and individual concerns. In effect, each *guslar* is able to say, “this is the greatest of all singers – that’s the truth – and he is my direct forebear.” In a sense this is a crucial kind of truth, and a crucial because dynamically adaptable and useful kind of history.

Truth as traditionally constituted

At another juncture during the same interview, Vujnović posed the query that appears as an epigraph to this essay. I add here Bašić’s answer:

- NIKOLA VUJNOVIĆ: Što misliš ti, Ibro – je li to istina u tije[m] pjesmama što se pjeva?
 IBRO BAŠIĆ: Jes’, Bogami, ima dosta istine, jes’.
 NV: Je li sve istina, misliš?
 IB: Sve je istina, ja mislim, jes’ . . . ali bilo je, Bogami, svašto, i junaka je bilo, i prije bivalo je dosta – i konji i junaci i sablje i svekoliko je bilo. Jer nije k’o je danas bilo.
- NV: What do you think, Ibro – is it the truth in these [epic] songs they sing?
 IB: Yes, by God, there’s truth enough, yes.
 NV: Is it all truth, do you think?
 IB: It’s all truth, I think, yes . . . but there were, by God, all these things, and there were heroes, and in earlier times there were enough of them – horses and heroes and sabers, and so many things there were. It wasn’t then as it is today.

Much of what we encounter in Muslim epic collected in the twentieth century is at root Ottoman in chronology and provenience; that is, a substantial portion dates from approximately the sixteenth-century sultanate of Sulejman the Magnificent (1520–66) and shortly afterward. At the same time, and parallel to the Homeric epics, the songs of the *guslari* also contain strata of material culture, social organization, and political realities from later periods. But this diachronic amalgamation of things and ideas from a variety of times – along with fictionalized characters and events, of course – does not translate to naiveté or “bad history” for Bašić, who clearly understands and trusts the epics as an inheritance passed down from other singers, as traditionally constituted history and as cultural identity. Just because his history does not square with ours, in other words, we cannot simply dismiss it. To believe in “horses and heroes and sabers” and to portray heroic deeds via convention-based tale-telling patterns is to practice a historiography manifestly different from ours, but no less functional in its own right. We must consider the superficially unlikely conclusion that – on its own terms – Bašić’s traditional history is true.

A Morphology of South Slavic Oral Epic

South Slavic epic consists of two major subgenres, Muslim and Christian, and each of those categories comprises a wealth of stories and storytelling forms. In order to gain a sense of the variety inherent in this tradition, and to test the concept of traditional history over a broad spectrum of song-types, let us look briefly at the characteristics of the two subgenres.

Muslim epic

Parry and Lord focused their collection and analysis on the so-called Muslim songs (*muslimanske pjesme*) of the Former Yugoslavia, chiefly from the region we call Bosnia and parts of Croatia.⁷ The reasoning behind this initiative was practical and straightforward: as the longer, the more elaborate of the two strains, Muslim epic seemed to offer a better comparison with the lengthy, famously detailed Homeric epics. In that respect, the match was appropriate: Muslim epic performances of as many as 18,000 lines (2,000 lines more than the *Iliad*) have been recorded, although most are considerably shorter.⁸ Stemming from its days as a court poetry during the Ottoman Empire, this subgenre of epic eventually entered the village coffeehouse environment in the twentieth century, where the chiefly male clientele supported the performance of long tales that could require multiple nights to complete. For this purpose, and especially during Ramadan, coffeehouse proprietors actively sought *guslari* who could keep their audiences interested over long periods.⁹

The *dramatis personae* of Muslim epic include such apparently fictional figures as Djerdelez Alija, a semi-independent hero who lives alone and appears only when dire circumstances present themselves. More socially networked is Mustajbey of the Lika, the powerful but duplicitous leader whose Agamemnon-like role is often to marshal a conglomerate force from various regions in pursuit of a stolen fiancée or an enemy town. At the same time, and reflecting his connection to the highly liminal borderland called the Lika, Mustajbey can turn on those loyal to him, allowing their capture and imprisonment. Among his comrades-in-arms are the noted heroes and brothers Mujo and Halil, who are always readily available to beat back the Christian enemy, sometimes after donning disguises, whenever they are not engaged in their ongoing fraternal feud. (Their amusing argument over the horse they inherited from their mother, which ends with a proposal much like the biblical Solomon's, is a common set-piece in the tradition.) The same is true for the trickster figure Tale of Orašac, who sits atop a swayback horse pestered by swarms of flies, accompanied by a standard-bearer who rides backward. Notwithstanding his comic appearance and apparent liabilities, all commanders know that Tale is the one essential warrior in the most important battles: as the proverb goes, "There can be no journey there without him."¹⁰

Christian epic

Other regions of the Former Yugoslavia, in particular Serbia, fostered another sub-genre of epic frequently referred to as Christian, again in order to identify its practitioners and cultural background rather than its content. This was the tradition most famously collected by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić and others in the nineteenth century, and widely understood by native investigators as “classic” poetry.¹¹ Although the two epic subgenres share aspects of phraseology and even some narrative patterns, the Christian songs are marked by their relative brevity – seldom more than 250 lines in length, with a corresponding sparseness in detail. This quality seems to stem from the historical context in which they arose and thrived: their performance arena was not as specialized or regularly occurring as that of the Muslim songs, consisting primarily of open, non-calendrical events and celebrations with diverse audiences rather than the male-only coffeehouse situation.

Two of the major clusters of Christian songs concern Prince Marko, the fourteenth-century Serbian hero who became an Ottoman mercenary, and the people and events surrounding the epochal Battle of Kosovo (1389). Both topics are historical in the modern sense, although both have also taken on legendary character in the epics. Marko evolved into a larger-than-life symbol of Serbian resistance against the Turkish overlords, with songs like “Marko Drinks Wine at Ramadan” portraying his insurgent cultural activities while others, such as “Prince Marko and Musa the Beheader,” establish his unparalleled heroic credentials.¹² Similarly, the real-life figure Prince Lazar, leader of the doomed Serbian force at Kosovo, appears in the oral epic as an augmented, symbolic portrait of bravery and commitment, his tragic demise only underlining the glory of the cause. At the same time, both strands of the Christian tradition also include entirely fictional characters, such as the famous Kosovo maiden, whose fate is to search the battlefield only to learn that her betrothed and his two young companions have perished. Among the richest and most traditional of Marko songs is the tale of the great warrior’s death, which proceeds along the ubiquitous pattern of “Arming the Hero” – only in this case the hero *disarms*, destroying his war-gear and even his faithful horse Šarac as he prepares for his farewell to life.¹³

Traditional versus “Factual” History

At first sight South Slavic oral epic may seem far removed from (what we understand as) history. But that contrast should not lead us to dismiss oral epic as a historical source. In this section we will look at the texture and expressive paradigms underlying both subgenres of epic, in an attempt to illustrate the ways in which traditional history actually does present a viable, internally consistent view of the past. At the level of specific units and patterns, the two subgenres of epic do not operate identically, but the principles behind their composition – and, just as importantly for us, their reception – closely mirror one another.

How Muslim epic works

In the Muslim songs *guslari* deploy a battery of compositional strategies to create and re-create their narratives: from largest to smallest, they are *story-patterns*, *typical scenes*, and *formulaic phraseology*. At the upper end of the array, singers compose along one of a number of tale-types, for example Return (the story of the *Odyssey*, though with the double possibility of a positive or a negative reception for the hero), Wedding (the rescue of a captured fiancée via a grand battle), or Siege of City (vying for control of a major Turkish town).¹⁴ Each of these story-patterns provides a recognizable sequence of events that allows for variation by character, incident, and geography as well as overall flexibility in detail. There is enough structure to identify the tale-type and create a map of expectation, and at the same time enough freedom to allow the *guslar* to personalize the story and to tell it somewhat differently each time, depending on the circumstances of performance. Story-patterns operate via rule-governed variability, and, like all traditional structures, they simply amount to special cases of language itself.

Into these networked series of pathways singers insert both generic and individual characters. The Return Song dependably involves a hero in captivity who escapes and, in impenetrable disguise, tests the loyalty of his mate and other members of his family before revealing his true identity. The Wedding Song features a young man coming of age in a difficult situation, usually as his fiancée has been kidnapped by a Christian foe. Protagonists in these dramas have different names, and many *guslari* tell essentially the same story in what they understand as different songs. Alongside the generic characters stand memorable individuals such as Tale of Orašac, the inimitable trickster mentioned above; innkeeper Mara, the Turkish sympathizer who helps her allies get behind enemy lines; and the Knezević twins, double-agents who can assist either side. The fluent audience member will recognize both generic and individual figures, and will add the implications of their actions and behavior to the predictive, proleptic quality of the story-pattern.

At a middle level we encounter typical scenes, those frequently recurring, stereotyped action-sequences that are elaborated in harmony with the particular story, the singer's talents, and the vagaries of the specific performance situation. Common examples include Shouting in Prison in the Return paradigm, with an incarcerated Turkish hero complaining loudly enough to prevent the captor's infant son from sleeping and thereby threatening the royal lineage; or the report of the ambushed wedding-attendants in the Wedding Song, wherein the sole survivor relates the story of the young maiden's kidnapping and precipitates the journey and battle that will follow. In both cases, and in all other typical scenes, there is room for the individual *guslar* to adapt the scene-structures in accordance with the particular story and other variables. In this sense these compositional (and cognitive) units are opportunities for artistic realization, rather than prefabricated, predetermined action-lists. Once again, they resemble linguistic structures with their built-in, systematic morphology.

At the micro-structural level of Muslim epic we encounter the shared network of formulaic phraseology, the specialized language or register that supports oral epic composition within decasyllabic lines. The mix includes both generic and individual-oriented (but still traditional) diction, founded ultimately on traditional rules for metrical word-placement.¹⁵ From a linguistic point of view all of these phrases prove useful structurally, but we should not miss the significance of their idiomatic value, which *guslari* exploit to great artistic advantage. For example, the generic formulas *nerodjena majka* (lit., “non-birthing mother”) and *kukavica crna* (lit., “black cuckoo”) both fill the second colon of the epic line, providing metrical solutions to compositional challenges, but they also connote recognizable figures within the larger tradition. “Non-birthing mother” names the special synthetic kin relationship between a powerful woman and a young male hero, most often between the Christian captor’s wife and the Turkish captive in a Return song. This idiomatic phrase signals that the natural separation created by ethnic enmity (Turk vs. Christian) has been dissolved in favor of some ulterior motive, usually the bargaining for release of the captive. Likewise, the phrase “black cuckoo” designates a woman who – whatever her position or other characteristics – has been or is about to be widowed. In neither case does the literal meaning of the phrase indicate its idiomatic content; instead, the connotations of the phrases – their immanent art – derives from their identity as traditional speech.¹⁶

As for individual-oriented phraseology, formulas that represent specific characters also convey more than literal signification. The most common noun-epithet formula for that two-faced leader of Turkish armies (*lički Mustajbeže*, “Mustajbey of the Lika”) acts as a pathway to his broader traditional identity, the Gestalt of his appearances not just in the present song but in all songs within the audience’s experience. Similarly, “Fool Tale” (*budaline Tale*) conjures the trickster figure complete with his implied biography – as necessary hero, as woebegone horseman, as brother of a mad sister who runs naked, and so forth. Such recurrent bytes of phraseology effectively serve as lemmata in the living lexicon of the epic tradition, headwords that imply much deeper, more extensive meanings. When a *guslar* invokes epic diction, he takes advantage of its built-in networking to create rich, multi-dimensional characterizations with the equivalent of a few deft brush-strokes. Far from being limited by the epic register, he is able to tap into its ready resources of idiomatic connotation.

Of course, this in turn means that epic language – on all three levels of structure – will inevitably fall short of conveying what we conceive of as historical fact. Deferral to a traditional, idiomatic way of speaking necessarily involves organic variability rather than singular textual certitude, plasticity rather than absolute fixation. Even though the flexibility of oral epic composition is rule-governed and varies within limits, epic portrayals of characters and events cannot ever aspire to the ideology of text. From one perspective, then, oral epic is endemically recursive rather than discursive. It returns to adaptable models embedded in the traditional way of speaking rather than attempts a unique, unprecedented construction of past realities. As a consequence, oral epic is often critiqued as an unreliable source for conventional, “factual” history.¹⁷

How Christian epic works

Given their disparities in length and social milieu, it may not be surprising that Christian epic functions somewhat differently from its Muslim counterpart. The Christian songs tend to be character- or event-centered, with related stories revolving around focal episodes rather than a more sprawling concatenation of linked narratives.¹⁸ For example, two of the most common types of Christian songs involve those attached to Prince Marko and to the Battle of Kosovo, as mentioned above. But this is not the only difference. Although we find both generic and individual characterization as in the Muslim epics, the Christian songs work more like linked chapters in an oral anthology. Prior (or even later) characterization and events are implicit in each story, so that “intertextuality” – but without texts – becomes an even more important force than in the Muslim songs. Such paratactic, “beads on a string” organization has definite implications for how we understand the Christian songs. For example, we will often look in vain for a figure’s particular and immediate motivation within a single song; not seldom, the reason for an action or the foundation for an event lies in another chapter, another oral epic from the larger tradition. Singers in both subgenres of South Slavic oral epic depend on their audience’s fluency, but in somewhat different ways.

Alongside these differences we also find many similarities. The three-level synergy of compositional units – story-pattern, typical scene, and formulaic phraseology – is very much in play in the Christian epics, although the actual formulaic repertoire can vary widely. As with the Muslim songs, all of these units index traditional realities much larger than the story-performance taking place, and thus generate a recognizable frame of reference for the specific action of the narrative. Once again, they imply more than they denote, appealing to the epic tradition on a *pars pro toto* basis.¹⁹

A prominent song-instance may serve to illustrate the idiomatic power involved here. A competent audience for the Prince Marko songs, having heard a number of stories portraying different aspects of his character, will know from the start of any performance that Marko is an unwilling, forced mercenary to the Turkish tsar, that he is proud past the point of arrogance, that he is selfish and remarkably tight-fisted, that he seems not to interact well with any women except his mother Jevrosima, and that he will always (sometimes inexplicably) gain the upper hand in battle, even if doing so requires less than heroic behavior. Because they are fully aware of these qualities from other “chapters” in the oral epic anthology, competent audience members will not be surprised when Marko boldly plunks his boots on the tsar’s prayer-rug, or drinks and dances in spite of the imperial edict forbidding such behavior, or breaks a promise to marry the black Arab’s daughter as a condition for his release from captivity, or defeats the clearly superior hero Musa through a secret maneuver.

Of course, as fiction amplified by conventional expression, these arresting and memorable events never actually happened. Here as elsewhere oral epic defers to a traditional, idiomatic way of speaking, a medium that fosters the telling and retelling

of important cultural narratives via flexible, highly connotative forms. Like Muslim epic in principle if not always in detail, Christian epic depends upon rule-governed variation in order to create and transmit its message, and it does so recursively rather than discursively. As Svetozar Koljević, perhaps the leading commentator on this subgenre of South Slavic oral epic, puts it, “For such insights [as the songs contain] open imaginative vistas far beyond the actualities, customs, and social norms of the feudal and patriarchal Slav civilizations in the Balkans – this is why they express their spirit better than their realities” (1980: 343). Given how we customarily construe history, “spirit” rather than “realities” does not constitute a dependable basis for interpretation of the past.

The Role of Epic as a Charter for Group Identity

But what if presumed “realities” lay more in the mind’s eye of the culture and in the speech-act involved than in our imposed and unexamined preconceptions? Suppose we started not by blindly subscribing to modern, text-based criteria of putative objectivity and fact, but rather by posing two potentially disarming questions about the nature of history. Suppose we asked: (1) Whose history is it? and (2) On what terms is it configured, transmitted, and received? If we are willing to pose these questions as a preliminary to rendering judgment on the issue of history in South Slavic oral epic, we can avoid foreshortening the inquiry. We can avoid the tautological process of prescribing the answer before we begin investigating the problem.

Whose history is it?

In plainest terms, traditional history as portrayed in South Slavic oral epic belongs to the tradition-owners – not to us or to some imagined (and illusory) universal audience but to those who developed, performed, and listened to the epic. When the Muslim songs were court poetry during the Ottoman Empire, the epic tradition served as a cultural and political history supporting the regime by rooting it in the glorious sixteenth-century past of Sulejman the Magnificent and all of the (real and fictional/symbolic) people and events of that time and place. Later on, when that species of epic became primarily a denizen of the coffeehouse, it continued to provide ratification of the present by citation of the past – a fictionalized past, to be sure, but nonetheless an idealized heritage that could be summoned as a collective chronicle, a kind of group biography. When the Christian songs were performed before mixed audiences at celebrations and other recurring and non-recurring events, they too anchored the group’s identity in a tradition that spoke of shared values, nationalism, and behavioral principles.

Oral epic provides a vehicle for collective negotiation of historical context, a tool for living. Within this historical mode tradition-bearers and -owners express long-standing beliefs and points of view in their own culture’s terms and for their own

culture's purposes. From the perspective of modern, textualized history, which assumes a fundamentally different point of view, this brand of interpretation may seem false; it may appear to lack distance, to suffer from the interposition of a distorting lens, to fall victim to subjectivity. But on the positive side of the ledger, traditional history as encoded in oral epic boasts an immediacy, adaptability, and continuity that conventional history cannot match. Narrators and consumers of traditional history may often come into conflict with outsiders who claim a different truth, but for the purposes of the involved group that is a phenomenon as insignificant as it is inevitable. The role of traditional history is to serve as a charter for group identity, not to try to escape or explain away the built-in ideological blindspots from which, to one extent or another, all history suffers (and, from the insider's point view, profits).

How is it configured, transmitted, and received?

This role has implications for answering our second question – on what terms is traditional history as portrayed in South Slavic oral epic configured, transmitted, and received? What we encounter in both Muslim and Christian epic is a diachronically constructed identity that morphs according to the rules of the medium. That is, the epic stories follow large patterns to which details from various eras accrete over time. As a result, what we might call anachronism, whether of material culture, language, or some other aspect of the epic, proves a misnomer.²⁰ When the medium owes primary allegiance to a special register or way of speaking (as opposed to what we imagine as established fact and discursive representation), then it cannot be expected to conform to an external and irrelevant set of imposed standards. In traditional history the past is expressed or instanced in an endless series of “presents”; at the same time, it is always framed and informed by the special medium used for communication, not by some other medium. And it is certified by appeal to traditional roots, often by explicit referral to the epic performance tradition as the authoritative resource.

For these reasons South Slavic oral epic – and its traditional history – are homeostatic and idiomatic. Because of the paradigms large and small that constitute the language of communication, both the Muslim and the Christian songs morph within limits. Meaning inheres not solely or even principally in revolutionary perspectives that shed new light on familiar moments and situations, but rather in harnessing an accepted way of speaking that brings old or new material within the compass of epic expression and makes it intelligible. If from a post-traditional point of view this dynamic produces an “archaeological dig” account of the past, with contributions traceable to various periods appearing side by side, from the point of view of traditional history it contextualizes the flotsam and jetsam of lived experience by applying a known and highly valued frame of reference. Foreground and background are reversed, as the *guslar's* register encodes reality in a format approved for fluent composition and reception.

In direct answer to our second question, then, the configuration, transmission, and reception of South Slavic oral epic must be understood on its own terms, which are the terms of the tradition-owners and -consumers. To “read” this medium in any other way is to misread it. In other words, traditional history offers an unabashedly subjective viewpoint, so that our modern insistence on externally verifiable truth – or rather its lack – becomes irrelevant. That is why a village farmer of modest means sees no discrepancy in celebrating Ottoman opulence, even though handsome steeds and royal finery have no real connection to his daily life. That is why the songs collected by Vuk Karadžić in the nineteenth century (chronicling the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, for the most part) have been a staple in Belgrade schools for generations. And, unfortunately, that is also why the Serbian dictator Slobodan Milošević was able to rise to power and maintain his inhuman regime by appealing to music and folktales from traditional culture (Gordy 1999: esp. 103–64). Traditional history operates below the radar, almost subliminally; it depends on its status as an unexamined kind of truth, a subjectivity unto itself. But, as becomes apparent if we can manage to put aside our own ideologically based presumptions, all history does essentially the same thing. One culture’s truth is another’s fiction.

Envoi: A “Basis in Fact”

Does oral epic present the truth? Yes, on its own terms. Does our modern textual sense of history present the truth? The answer is the same, but on different terms. So a third question must arise: when they do not agree on their construction of reality (and they usually do not), is it then traditional history or conventional history that diverges from the truth? Which account do we trust? Which vehicle is the more dependable? Which is the standard and which the aberration?

What I hope to have shown in this essay is that past realities – always necessarily reconstructed – are more a matter of perspective and ideology than of unearthing facts, that they have more to do with the media-vehicle we employ than with any absolute, discoverable singularity. Whether we impose an oral epic frame of reference or one of the historiographer’s narrative tools (rise and fall, biography of the great individual, the cataclysmic event, etc.), we are to an extent predetermining the nature of the exposition. Simply put, each lens brings certain features of reality into focus and suppresses others, and for that reason no perspective will ever simply mirror “what happened.” Each lens will tell us as much about ourselves and our abiding cultural predispositions as about the history we seek to re-create.

Let me close by illustrating this inescapable relativity with a brief exercise in etymology. In common parlance we understand the word “fact” as denoting inviolable, eternal truth, as designating something that pre-exists, that precedes the act of investigation and needs only to be brought to light in order to set things straight. Thus we speak with confidence of, for example, the facts behind the onset of the Black Death in the later Middle Ages, or of a factual basis for ancient Greek attitudes toward musical education. By tacit agreement we believe that submerged pillars of

unambiguous explanation exist and are merely awaiting discovery, if only we can sift intelligently through the evidence gathered by generations of scholars. With enough patient work, we assume, those elusive nuggets of long-buried truth will at last be found and all ambiguity will be laid to rest.

But consider the irony of the etymological background of “fact,” which derives from Latin *facta*, “things *made* or *created*.” At its root this word, which we conventionally employ to refer to an ultimate, timeless, objective verity, actually indicates nothing of the sort: at a literal level it names something *constructed*, presumably by humans investigating a process and attempting to interpret it and convey its mysteries to others. At bottom, “fact” is not at all ultimate, timeless, or objective. Against the background of etymology, our use of that word amounts to an ideological strategy, a privileging of the interpretation to which we subscribe as superior to all others and thus deserving of exclusive attention. That is what is going on behind the scenes, as it were: the reduction of multiple perspectives, multiple histories, to a single explanation that then becomes culturally authorized reality.

If we are open-minded enough to step back from our exclusive focus on fixed, textual history and credit oral epic with its own perspective and social function as a source for cultural identity, we can perhaps see that the epic performances of the South Slavic *guslari* are not simply a naïve or failed attempt at historical accuracy. As a unified set of constructed “facts,” the South Slavic oral epics actually do present a viable and usable reality for their constituency, a portrayal of their past that supports cultural identity on a grand scale. Traditional history has its own value and function: it provides a rich and ready frame of reference for making coherent sense of the world. Understood on its own terms, within its own context, and with a respect for what it does on behalf of its constituency, the traditional history encoded in South Slavic oral epic is far from a flawed or incomplete “document.” It is vital, it is supportive, and most of all it is the truth.

Notes

- 1 This and other passages drawn from the Parry-Lord-Vujnović fieldwork are quoted with the permission of the Milman Parry Collection at Harvard University. Let me express my thanks to Stephen Mitchell, Gregory Nagy, and David Elmer, curators of the Collection. On the contents of the Collection, see Kay 1995. All editions and translations are my own.
- 2 Given the political instability and linguistic complexity of the Former Yugoslavia, as well as the fact that many epic narratives are shared across dialect (and ethnic) areas, I choose to refer to the oral epic tradition of the region as “South Slavic.” Although this term, when used linguistically, usually implies Bulgarian, Slovenian, and Macedonian as well and therefore might seem too broad a designation here, I prefer to err on the side of inclusiveness rather than exclusivity.
- 3 See, e.g., Murko 1990; Parry 1971 (esp. his field notes, “Ćor Huso,” pp. 437–64); Braun 1961; Lord 1960/2000, 1991, 1995; Foley 1990, 1991, 1995, 1999a; and example performances in *SCHS* and Foley 2004a (online eEdition at <http://oraltradition.org/zbm>). A history of the Parry–Lord theory and its roots in anthropology and philology is

available in Foley 1988. On the comparative study of oral traditions, see the journal *Oral Tradition* (1986–), with all 23 years of issues now available online, free of charge, and in searchable format at <http://journal.oraltradition.org>.

- 4 All quotations from the conversation are taken from Parry no. 6598; see note 1 above. On Bašić and other *guslari* from the Stolac region, see further Foley 1990: 42–51, 158–200, 278–328, and 359–87.
- 5 For a fuller explanation of this function in the South Slavic oral epic tradition, with comparative references to Homer, the Mongolian bard Choibang, and the Old English *scop* Widsith, see Foley 1999a: 49–62. On Homer as a legendary singer, see further Nagy 1996 and Graziosi 2002.
- 6 Alois Schmaus (1938) made concerted attempts to discover a historical singer behind reports of this legendary figure, and was frustrated with his inability to do so. Such is the ideological strength of our modern textual model, which demands a unique source and a unique work. Oral epic tradition offers neither; in fact, it thrives on what digital theorists call “distributed authorship” (see Foley 2008).
- 7 This label reflects the religion of the practitioners (the singers themselves) and the cultural background, rather than any specifically religious content in the songs themselves. On the Muslim songs, see further note 3 above, to which should be added Coote 1978 and Foley 1991: chs. 3–4; 2005b.
- 8 It bears mentioning that on an international scale the longest of the South Slavic epics, as well as the *Iliad* (about 16,000 lines) and the *Odyssey* (about 12,000 lines), are about average in length; central Asian oral epics run to 100,000 lines and more (see further Reichl 1992, 2000 on Turkic epic and Foley 2004b for comparative context). Cf. the particularly well-studied *Siri Epic* from southern India, performed by Gopala Naika at approximately the length of the *Iliad* (see Honko 1998, 2000; Honko et al. 1998). On epics in the modern world, see Beissinger et al. 1999.
- 9 On the comparison between Homeric and South Slavic Muslim epic, see further Foley 1999a: esp. 37–111. The Muslim material shows clear evidence of differentiation by idiolect (the individual singer), dialect (the regional group of singers), and the tradition as a whole (see Foley 1990: 121–57); these distinctions may be useful as an analogy to phraseological and other differences among the Homeric epics, the Hesiodic poems, and the Homeric Hymns.
- 10 Original: “Tamo *prez* njeg’ hoda neĵimade” (e.g., in Halil Bajgorić’s *The Wedding of Mustajbey’s Son Bećirbey*, line 412 [Foley 2004a]). On this remarkable character, see further Foley 1995: esp. 32–41.
- 11 See Karadžić 1841–62 (original-language edition), Holton and Mihailovich 1997 (English translation), and Foley 1983 (comparative aesthetics).
- 12 On the historical and legendary aspects of this figure, see Popović 1988.
- 13 On traditional structure and implications in the Marko poems, see Foley 1991: 96–134.
- 14 On Return, see Foley 1990: 359–87; 1999a: 115–67; 2002: 166–71; on Wedding, Foley 2004a: 37–40, 195; on Siege of City, see, e.g., Salih Ugljanin’s performance of the *Song of Baghdad* (*SCHS*, vol. 1, no. 1).
- 15 On the traditional rules that govern formulaic diction in Homeric, South Slavic, and Anglo-Saxon epic, see Foley 1990: 121–57, 158–200, and 201–39, respectively.
- 16 On the approach through immanent art, or traditional referentiality, see Foley 1991: *passim*, and 2002: 109–24. Another perspective is provided by Bradbury 1998.
- 17 This is essentially the conclusion reached by Benjamin Stolz in his study of the Parry–Lord singer Salih Ugljanin’s performance of *Grčki rat* (*Greek War*): “within a

- framework of traditional motifs and formulas of the oral epic genre, the song displays a certain amount of confusion in its presentation of historical detail; but its core . . . is historical" (1967: 424). He goes on to cite stock compositional elements (heroic ultimatum, sending of messages, and phraseology) as evidence of tradition overriding history.
- 18 Let me mention here an important but little-studied feature of lengthy oral epics: their relationship to one another in what are sometimes called "cycles." Because so much is implied by any performance, no matter how (textually) limited in itself, understanding the skein or constellation of an oral epic tradition is difficult for scholars trained to focus on one apparently freestanding epic story at a time. See further Foley 1999b.
 - 19 The nominal part standing for a complex whole seems to be a fundamental expressive strategy in oral tradition. See further the concept of "traditional referentiality" (Foley 1991).
 - 20 On linguistic archaisms in South Slavic and Homeric epic, see Foley 1999a: 80–3.

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Lord Five Thunder and the 12 Eagles and Jaguars of Rabinal Meet Charlemagne and the 12 Knights of France

DENNIS TEDLOCK

In the town of Rabinal, in the mountains north of Guatemala City, the dry season brings an opportunity to hear the story of two heroic warriors whose adventures took place in a world where no Europeans had ever set foot. One of them caused so much trouble for his enemies that they described him as

k'o qa waram
he who is the dream
majabi qa yakalem ruk'
from which we cannot awaken.¹

The story is told in K'iche' Maya, and it is sounded out in short lines like these two, separated from one another by deliberate pauses. Most of the lines form groups of two or three that are parallel in their meaning (as in this case) or their syntax, or both.

Performances take place outdoors, in courtyards and plazas. The words are spoken rather than sung, delivered loudly and slowly enough to be understood by listeners standing nearby. There is music, but it is purely instrumental, played during interludes when the speaking stops. The presentation is a drama in the sense that the parts of the characters in the narrative are taken by separate performers who dialogue with one another, but it is an epic in the sense that they narrate most of the major events rather than acting them out. Most of the events have recognizable counterparts in historical documents, but there are anachronisms. The characters, like those in *chansons de geste*, are involved in events that belong to different periods in historical time.

This dramatized epic is known by two titles: *Rabinal Achi* and *Xajoj Tun*, "Man of Rabinal" and "Dance of the Trumpets." It has its origin in the meeting of two

traditions in the performing arts, one of them indigenous to Mesoamerica and the other introduced by Europeans. Before the Spanish invasion, the ruling houses of Mesoamerican kingdoms sponsored public dramatic productions that commemorated historical events. The oldest direct evidence for Mayan dramas of this kind has been found at the lowland Guatemalan site of Dos Pilas, in two seventh-century inscriptions on the risers of a stone stairway.² The earlier of the two texts concerns an attack on the city of Tikal that drove its ruler into exile, followed by a retaliatory attack on Dos Pilas. The text that was added later records the performance of a dance at Dos Pilas in which the two earlier occurrences were dramatized.

The actors in ancient Mesoamerican theater danced while the dialogue was sung back and forth by two choruses, or by a single chorus that sang all the parts (D. Tedlock 2003: 159–63). With the Spanish invasion and occupation of the sixteenth century came a massive campaign to replace all indigenous forms of public art and architecture with their European counterparts. In the case of the performing arts, the early missionaries acted quickly to replace indigenous theater with productions modeled on the vernacular theater of medieval Europe (Mace 1970: 31–8). The dialogue in the plays they introduced was scripted, and nearly all of it was in rhymed and metered Spanish verse. The actors spoke their lines rather than singing, and though there were interludes in which they danced, the music was purely instrumental.

Neither writing nor paper were new to Mayans at the time of the invasion. They had been using their own writing system for nearly 2,000 years, and for more than half that time they had been compiling books with paper pages.³ Using a combination of syllabic and logographic signs, they were capable of recording anything that could be said in their languages, but there is no evidence that they ever created scripts – or, for that matter, Scripture. In other words, they did not use writing to dictate, word for word, what a performer should say, nor did they canonize any particular written work. When they made use of a previous source, they rewrote it rather than quoting it directly (D. Tedlock 1998: 187–8).

Public events in ancient Mayan towns were scheduled by a system of time reckoning that coordinated the 260 days of a divinatory calendar with the periods of the sun, moon, and planets, while at the same time keeping chronological accounts of historical events. The invaders brought their own calendar with them, and missionaries scheduled performances of their plays for saints' days or other days sanctified by the Catholic Church. In the Guatemalan highlands, Mayans have continued to use their own calendar to schedule independent events right down to the present day. The events in question are rituals devoted to the deities of the mountains and valleys where they live and to their ancestors, mostly performed in private homes and at shrines in secluded locations (B. Tedlock 1992).

In the Mayan communities of Guatemala, as elsewhere in Mesoamerica, missionaries placed the direction of their plays in the hands of laypersons who had been schooled in alphabetic literacy. The actors, whether or not they had been to school or knew much Spanish, memorized their parts by repeating what the director of a play read aloud to them from his manuscript. As time went on the

manuscripts became prized possessions, passed down through family lines. New ones were created when old ones were at the point of wearing out, or when an aspiring director from another town paid to make a copy or have one made. As is typical of manuscript culture, the scribes made corrections, revisions, deletions, and additions. Many of these plays continue to be performed in present-day Guatemala, and the actors continue to learn their parts from a director who reads aloud from his manuscript.

Some productions are mystery plays, based on biblical stories, while others are miracle plays, based on the lives of saints. Still others, commonly known by the title *Moros y cristianos*, dramatize the military and religious victories of Christians over opponents who are variously identified as Moors, Turks, Mohammedans, or pagans. Some of these plays commemorate the fifteenth-century Spanish victory over the Moors of Granada, while others have their roots in Charlemagne's eighth-century expedition across the Pyrenees. Most of the extant scripts for the latter plays are in verse, but they are based on a prose work, *La historia de Carlo Magno y los doce pares de Francia*, first printed in Spain in 1521. This is Nicolás Piamonte's Spanish translation of *Fierabras*, a prose version of the *Chanson de Roland* that was one of the earliest literary works to be disseminated by the printing press, making its first appearance in France in 1486 (Morales Hidalgo 1988: 4–5).

Beginning in the middle of the sixteenth century, Mayans used the Roman alphabet to create works in their own languages. Among the early works of highland Mayans is the *Popol Wuj* or "Council Book," an account of the origin of the present world and the history of the K'iche' kingdom (D. Tedlock 1996; Sam Colop 1999). Other works include the scripts for two plays, one of which tells the story of the Spanish conquest of Mexico but puts K'iche' characters alongside the Aztecs (Edmonson 1997: 1–80). The parts of all the indigenous characters are written in K'iche', while those of the Spaniards are written in Spanish. One of the K'iche'-speaking characters, *Saqi K'oxol* or "White Flint," gives his name to the play. In an early scene he performs a divination using the 260-day calendar, and at the end he becomes the only indigenous character to escape baptism.

The Dramatization of a World without Europeans

The other of the two plays scripted by Mayans during the colonial period had an all-Mayan cast of characters speaking all-Mayan dialogue. Like *Rabinal Achi*, it dramatized the capture and sacrifice of a prisoner of war in a world where neither Spaniards nor Christianity had any role. It was known by such titles as *Ni Ulew Tum*, "Great Earth Trumpets"; *Tum Teleche'*, "Trumpets of the Prisoner of War"; and *Xajoj Tum*, "Dance of the Trumpets," which still serves as an alternative title for *Rabinal Achi*. Though the lines were spoken, they were probably taken from songs that would have been sung by choruses in earlier commemorations of military events. The dance music was purely instrumental, but the instruments, including

the trumpets of the play's titles, were Mayan, and so were the tonality and rhythm. Some Spaniards found the music to be sad, while others reacted with horror (Toledo Palomo 1965).

Versions of this all-Mayan play were produced in many different towns. Colonial authorities, both civil and religious, were alarmed by its popularity, and they found the portrayal of a world without Europeans to be subversive. In particular, they were disturbed by the dramatization of the sacrifice of a prisoner of war, arguing that it would lead to real sacrifices. At the time of the conquest, the greatest fear of the Spanish invaders had not been death on the battlefield, but rather the possibility of being taken prisoner and sacrificed. Official attempts to suppress this Mayan play and the sound of its music began in 1593 and were repeated many times, with the last ban coming in 1770.⁴ *Rabinal Achi* is the sole surviving version.

The cast of characters for *Rabinal Achi* is as follows:

Kaweq K'eché Winag, "Kaweq of the Forest People," a warrior of noble birth who was once in the service of the ruling lords of the K'iche' kingdom but then became a renegade who raised his own army. Masked.

Rabinal Achi, "Man of Rabinal," also called *Uq'alel Achi*, "Man of Glory," a title that was conferred on commoners rather than inherited. A warrior in the service of Lord Five Thunder. Masked.

Ajaw Job Toj, "Lord Five Thunder," named after the date of his birth on the Mayan divinatory calendar. Ruler of the Kawuq and Rabinal nations. Masked.

Xoqajaw, "Lady" (literally "Woman Lord"), the wife of Lord Five Thunder. Veiled. Usually absent in recent performances.

Uchuch Q'uq', *Uchuch Raxon*, "Mother of Quetzal Feathers, Mother of Glistening Green," the unmarried daughter of Lord Five Thunder and Lady. Veiled in past performances but not in recent ones.

Achi Mun, *Ixoq Mun*, "Man Slave, Woman Slave," in the service of Lord Five Thunder. Masked as a man but dressed as a woman.

Kot and *Balam*, "Eagle" and "Jaguar," guards of the boundaries of Lord Five Thunder's court and kingdom. Twelve Eagles and Jaguars are mentioned in the dialogue, but only two are represented. Veiled.

The characters with speaking parts are the ones who wear masks: Kaweq of the Forest People, Man of Rabinal, Lord Five Thunder, and Man Slave, Woman Slave. All four of them, together with Mother of Quetzal Feathers, are visible in Figure 21.1, a photograph taken at a 1999 performance. Seated on the steps to their left is the *K'amol Be* or "Road Guide," the priest-shaman who prepared the way for their performance by offering prayers and incense to the spirits of the ancestral individuals they portray, and to the spirits of place who dwell at all the locations mentioned in the dialogue. To do this he visited those locations, among them the ruins of the citadel of the ancient lords of Rabinal, on a mountaintop overlooking the present town.



Figure 21.1 The opening performance of *Rabinal Achi* in the 1999 season, given in front of the town's cemetery chapel. From left to right: Road Guide, Man of Rabinal, Lord Five Thunder, Mother of Quetzal Feathers, Slave, and Kaweq. Man of Rabinal and Kaweq are engaged in dialogue. Photo by the author.

The music for *Rabinal Achi* is provided by two trumpets and a drum, as shown in Figure 21.2. Originally the trumpets were long and wooden, but a nineteenth-century director of the play commissioned brass replacements. The drum, made from a hollowed log, is what musicologists call a slit gong. Like its ancient and contemporary counterparts all over Mesoamerica, it is played with a pair of rubber-tipped sticks. The tongues of the H-shaped slit in its top side are of equal length but differ in thickness, so that they produce two distinct tones when struck, and a third tone is produced by striking on either side of the H.

The music performed on these instruments has structural features that identify it as having an indigenous rather than European origin (D. Tedlock 2003: 161–2). The melodic phrases are consistent with a general Amerindian preference for contours whose overall trend is downward. And, as elsewhere in the music of the highland Maya, the voices of the instruments are far more autonomous than in Western polyphony. The differences in the structure and length of the phrases played on each of the three instruments are such that any one of them is as likely to sound by itself as it is to sound in synchrony with either of the other two.

The choreography of *Rabinal Achi* contrasts with that of the plays introduced by missionaries (D. Tedlock 2003: 164–6). When the actors dance they move around



Figure 21.2 Two trumpeters and a drummer playing the dance music for *Rabinal Achi*. In processions, the man standing next to the far trumpeter carries the drum on his back while the drummer plays it. Photo by the author.

the perimeter of a square, and when they promenade they move in a circle. In both cases the direction is counterclockwise, which was the preferred direction in pre-Columbian dances. The pathway the actors share locates them all in one world, whereas the dancers in dramas of Spanish origin typically face one another in two parallel files, dancing into the intervening space at intervals and then returning to their places. In the case of dramas that confront Mohammedans with Christians, membership in the two files is determined accordingly, and the dancers wear costumes that clearly divide them between two separate worlds. In *Rabinal Achi*, on the other hand, the only thing that distinguishes Kaweq's clothing from that of his opponent, Man of Rabinal, is a difference in color combinations. In recent performances they have worn helmets adorned with contrasting animal heads, a jaguar for Kaweq and a coyote for Man of Rabinal (see Figure 21.1), but these animals belong to a single Mayan system of military symbolism.

Kaweq of the Forest People, Man of Rabinal, and Lord Five Thunder carry an ax in one hand and a small round shield in the other, and in this they are like the participants in a dance that is depicted in lowland Mayan murals and carvings of the Classic period (250–900 CE). Shown in Figure 21.3 are Kaweq (at left), as he



Figure 21.3 Kaweq in *Rabinal Achi* (at left) and an ancient lord of Palenque, both of whom carry an ax in the right hand and a small round shield in the left. Their axes and shields are emblems of royal power, not weapons of war. Photo by Dennis Tedlock, drawing courtesy of Merle Robinson.

appeared in the 1999 production, and a seventh-century lord of Palenque (at right). The ax held by the Palenque lord is a scepter in the form of an icon of the patron deity of lordship, whose power resides in lightning bolts and meteors, and the shield bears the face of the god of the planet Jupiter.⁵ The axes and shields of the play were probably shorn of their iconography long ago, but Man of Rabinal and Kaweq continue to speak of them as the sources of their *al*, meaning their “power” or “weight.”

Kaweq, Man of Rabinal, and Lord Five Thunder all have occasion to mention the Mayan divinatory calendar, using these words:

oxlaju winaq q'ij,
 thirteen score days,
oxlaju winaq aq'ab
 thirteen score nights

This is a reference to the 13-day numbers and 20-day names that combine to designate the 260 days of the divinatory calendar that gives Lord Five Thunder his name. Kaweq uses these lines when speaking of a pilgrimage he made to a series of mountain and valley shrines near the town of Rabinal. Such places would normally be visited on specific dates, but the script offers no details. During the colonial period, the public recital of such dates would have exposed indigenous rituals to the intervention of missionaries. Performances of the play itself are scheduled according to the Church calendar, beginning on or shortly before January 20, the day of St Sebastian, and ending on January 25, the day of the conversion of St Paul, the patron of the town of Rabinal. Even so, the mentions of the divinatory calendar, together with the date *Job Toj* or “Five Thunder,” serve to remind the audience of an alternative way of reckoning time.

A performance of *Rabinal Achi* lasts a little over two hours. Most of this time is filled with dialogue and dance routines that play no role in the plot. Otherwise, the action can be summarized as follows: Man of Rabinal confronts Kaweq, captures him, and takes him to the court of Lord Five Thunder. Kaweq attempts to attack the lord but is restrained by Man Slave, Woman Slave. The lord grants Kaweq a series of last requests, beginning with an intoxicating drink, served to him by the slave. Next, Kaweq is allowed to perform dances before the court, first while wearing an apron that is reserved for royalty, second with Mother of Quetzal Feathers as his partner, and third with Eagle and Jaguar as partners. After that he is allowed to say farewell, in prayer, to the mountains and valleys of his homeland. Then he is decapitated, as were notable prisoners of war among the ancient Maya.

Scripts, Memories, and Performances

The script currently in use in Rabinal, handwritten in 1913, is the latest in a series of texts that reaches back into the colonial past. Except for a list of actors, labels that identify their parts, and a few stage directions, everything is in a plain prose format. This is consistent with the practices of Mayan authors of the colonial period, who always used such a format. Apparently the missionaries who introduced alphabetic writing never heard or read anything they perceived as verse in Mayan languages, but this is not surprising. Western scholars did not recognize the existence of parallel verse in Mesoamerican texts until the second half of the twentieth century.

José León Coloch, the current producer and director of the play, uses a bound photocopy of the script in rehearsals. This does not weaken his authority, since his is the only copy in town, but it does raise the possibility that the next script will be a fresh photocopy of the 1913 version rather than a handwritten revision. Mechanical

reproduction entered the line of transmission once before, but without having the effect of fixing the text. The script in use before 1913 was a printed version, based on a manuscript (now lost) dated 1850 and published by Brasseur de Bourbourg in 1862, but only one copy of this book existed in Rabinal. Manuel Pérez, the creator of the 1913 script, worked from the book, but he made changes in the manner of a copyist working from a manuscript.⁶ And like other copyists who work within a system that combines texts with memorization, he made changes in wording and phrasing that were based, in part, on his sense of how they should sound when spoken.

The general effect of the changes made by Pérez was to increase the regularity of the verse patterns already present in the text, which he did without departing from a prose format. In the following passage, presented here as a parallel couplet, he partially filled the ellipsis in the second line by adding the underlined word:

chupam u nimal tz'aq,
inside the great fortress,
u nimal k'ox tun
the great walls

He also made couplets where there were none before by borrowing lines that occur elsewhere in the text:

are ba wa' nuqajom,
well this is the one I've borrowed,
nuchaq'im
I've been loaned

By making changes like these, Pérez and an unknown number of predecessors, over a period of three centuries, have produced a work that is far more regular in its verse patterns than any other lengthy K'iche' text with a colonial ancestry. What has been at work here is the process called "crystallization" by Gregory Nagy, who has traced a similar increase in the structural rigidity of Homeric texts through four centuries of parallel oral and written transmission (Nagy 1996: 108–9, 143–5).

One thing Nagy could not do is to study what happens at the moment when a text intended for memorization is read aloud. When I asked Coloch to read speeches from the Pérez text aloud for me, as he would for actors in training, I discovered that he made changes of the same sort Pérez made in rewriting the text. In the following passage, the underlined words are neither present in the script nor in the book Pérez worked from, though there are other passages in which mountains and valleys are paired in adjacent lines:

La mana rokikam
Isn't it right
xchintaqijta ubi
that I should be named

Ajaw K'amba Juyub
 Lord of Water Jar Mountain
Ajaw K'amba Tag'aj?
Lord of Water Jar Valley?

In this next passage, Coloch adds a line that exists nowhere in either text. He may have remembered it from a past performance, or he may have invented it himself:

are ba numebal wib
 well this is how I humble myself
are nuxoq'olobal wib wa'.
this is how I get down in the mud.

It remains to be seen whether the added line will find its way into a future script by way of the aural memory of a future copyist.

Departures from the text also take place during public performances. Omissions, some of them involving multiple lines, are made by actors who are struggling with lapses of memory. Changes like the ones shown above are produced by those who know the language and poetics of the play very well, so much so that they are able to say what is appropriate without necessarily following the exact words of the script at every moment. This is true above all of Coloch, who often takes the role of Kaweq, the character who has the most lines.⁷

Rabinal Achi as History

There may have been an historical lord named Five Thunder, though no such person has turned up in any documents other than the script. All the other characters in the play have generic names. Lord Five Thunder's wife is simply identified as Lady. Their daughter, Mother of Quetzal Feathers, Mother of Glistening Green, takes her name from an expression parents once used for a daughter whose marriage would bring them wealth in the form of quetzal feathers and jade. Man of Rabinal could be any one of a number of Rabinal warriors who had been granted the title Man of Glory by Lord Five Thunder. Man Slave, Woman Slave could be any slave, or any pair of slaves, and Eagle and Jaguar could be any two members of a group of 12 Eagles and 12 Jaguars mentioned in the dialogue.

The prisoner taken by Man of Rabinal is also identified in a generic manner. Kaweq is the name of the first-ranking royal house of the K'iche' nation, and "Forest People" is an epithet for that entire nation. Even so, the dialogue contains clues to a more specific identity for the prisoner – clues that that would have been understood by early audiences but have long since become textual artifacts. Man of Rabinal accuses Kaweq of having incited a revolt among the vassals of the very lords he was supposed to serve, saying,

Mana k'o awokibal chike

Even though it wasn't your right,
xa keayusq'opij kanog
 you set them loose
chi ki juyubal,
 from their mountain
chi ki taq'ajal.
 their valley.

This is a reference to a revolt that broke out in the center of the K'iche' kingdom around the end of the fourteenth century, during the reign of the most famous of K'iche' kings (D. Tedlock 1996: 180–5). The name by which he was remembered, *K'iqab* or “Many Hands,” may have been a figurative reference to the fact that he had five sons. While he was far away from home on a military campaign, his two youngest sons were among the participants in a revolt that took place at the center of his domain. The rebels raised an army and invaded the territory of nearby nations that had been long-time allies of the K'iche', among them Rabinal.

The dialogue contains a further clue to Kaweq's identity that narrows the possibilities to the youngest son of Many Hands, who was known to his enemies by the nickname *Tata Yak*, “Father Fox.” He held the noble title *Chituy*, which placed him fifth in the line of succession. Man of Rabinal never mentions the nickname or the title directly, but he alludes to both when he says to Kaweq,

Lal ba ri kaban la roq'ibal utiw,

You, sir, are the one who makes the cries of coyotes,
kaban la roq'ibal yak,
 who makes the cries of foxes,
kaban la roq'ibal utuy, balam.
 who makes the cries of agoutis and jaguars.

By following “foxes” with “agoutis,” he inflicts a clever insult on Kaweq. First of all, agoutis are easily frightened rodents that shriek when they flee. Second, in normal highland Mayan oratory, a list of animals like this one would follow foxes with pumas, not agoutis. And third, the term for agoutis, *utuy*, is a pun on Father Fox's title, *Chituy*.

Some of the deeds attributed to Kaweq of the Forest People belong to a different historical period than that of Father Fox's rebellion. For example, Man of Rabinal accuses Kaweq of having attempted to assassinate Lord Five Thunder on an occasion when the latter was in a bathhouse. An incident of this kind does appear in the historical record, but it took place three generations prior to Father Fox's revolt (D. Tedlock 1996: 178–9). Moreover, the bather was not a Rabinal lord, but rather a member of the Kaweq lineage who was the current ruler of the K'iche' nation. Because of this incident he became known as *K'otuja*, roughly translatable as “Bathhouse the Great.”

Rabinal Achi and *Carlo Magno*

At the same time that *Rabinal Achi* preserves the memory of a cultural and historical world that preceded the Spanish invasion, it is a product of the colonial world in ways that go beyond the fact that the actors memorize the words of an alphabetic script and carry out their performances on saints' days. The playwrights who composed or revised early versions of this and other dances of the trumpet were introducing their works into repertoires that otherwise consisted of plays of Spanish origin (unless *Saq K'oxol* had appeared by this time). What they produced, as evidenced in the script for *Rabinal Achi*, was not only a representation of the past but also a response to the Spanish plays, and especially to *Carlo Magno*.

For early Mayan audiences, one of the most peculiar features of the foreign plays would have been the oaths or blessings the characters utter in almost every speech. No doubt the missionaries saw these passages as serving a didactic purpose, but they also reflect longstanding habits of speech that are specific to Europeans. There is no evidence that Mayans or any other indigenous Americans peppered their conversations with invocations of divine powers before Europeans arrived. Even so, the characters in *Rabinal Achi* include oaths or blessings in their speeches. The composers of ancestral versions of the play could have chosen to omit these features on the grounds that they were foreign to Mayan habits of speech, but in that case they would have been passing up an opportunity to answer the incessant invocations of *Dios*, *Espíritu Santo*, *Jesús*, and *Emperatriz María* they were hearing in other plays with words their audiences would understand as alluding or referring to Mayan deities. They had a precedent for the invocation of non-Christian deities in *Carlo Magno*, whose Turkish characters call upon *dioses* (always in the plural), *Mahoma Santo*, and *Apolin* (Apollo).⁸ But it would have been dangerous to use Mayan proper names, given that the public worship of their own deities was closer in time and space to the colonial world than the deities named by imaginary Turks. The solution to this problem, reached at some point along the path that led to *Rabinal Achi*, was to use epithets instead of names.

The only divine epithets that survive in *Rabinal Achi* itself take the form of a pair of complementary metonyms, *Kaj* and *Ulew*, "Sky" and "Earth." Earlier versions of dances of the trumpets probably had more epithets, something like the ones in a script for *Saq K'oxol* that dates from 1726 (Edmonson 1997: 6–7). The indigenous characters in this drama use three pairs of metonyms that would have been combined with proper names in prayers. The first pair is *Unik'ajal Kaj*, *Unik'ajal Ulew*, "Center of the Sky, Center of the Earth," an epithet for the thunderbolt god represented by the ax scepter, who was also addressed as *Uk'ux Kaj*, *Uk'ux Ulew*, "Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth." Next comes *Cho*, *Palo*, "Lake, Sea," an epithet for deities whose original home was on the surface of the primordial waters that once covered the earth. Last comes a link between sky and earth, made by pairing *Inup* or "Ceiba," the name for the species of tree that serves as the Mayan *axis mundi*, with *Kaq Ja* or "Red House," the term for a pyramid with a temple on top.

The simplified “Sky, Earth” of *Rabinal Achi* may have survived the long history of bans because it gives at least the illusion that there is a point where Christian and Mayan theologies intersect. A listener who leaned toward Mayan tradition could have heard it as shortened version of “Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth,” but a listener who leaned in the opposite direction could have heard the same words as a shortened version of a central tenet of Christian catechisms and sermons, namely, “There is only one God in heaven and on the earth.” A similar divergence of interpretations continues today. For those who lean toward the Mayan side, the invocation of *Ulew* brings to mind a deity who is commonly invoked in K’iche’ as *Juyub, Taq’aj*, “Mountain, Valley,” and in Spanish as *Mundo, Santo Mundo*, and *Mundo Redondo*, “World,” “Holy World,” and “Round World.” The domain of this deity corresponds to the entire earth, which is conceived as complementing the celestial domain claimed by Christianity.

In *Carlo Magno*, the characters who invoke the names of non-Christian deities end up either dead or converted to Christianity, but in *Rabinal Achi*, all the characters agree in calling upon the same Sky and Earth, from the beginning of the play right through to the end. For early audiences, this would have recalled a time when not even enemies questioned one’s religious practices.

All the places named in *Carlo Magno*, ranging from Roncesvalles and Roma to Alexandría and Babilonia, belong to the distant world of the invaders. In contrast, the 30 mountains, valleys, and towns named in *Rabinal Achi* are all in the Guatemalan highlands, and all within the domains of the ancient lords of Rabinal and neighboring kingdoms (D. Tedlock 1996: map 1). Many of these places were and still are familiar to members of the local audience. The same was no doubt true of the multiple dances of the trumpet of the colonial period, with local variations in geographical and historical details. When these plays were first performed, the insistence on local geography would have been striking all by itself.

One of the features shared by *Carlo Magno* and *Rabinal Achi* is the number 12. The emperor Carlo Magno is served by *doce pares* or “12 peers,” meaning a dozen knights who include Roldán (Roland), while Lord Five Thunder is served by *kablajuj u Q’anal Kot, u Q’anal Balam*, “12 Golden Eagles, Golden Jaguars.” Twelve turns up in a number of other passages in *Rabinal Achi*, as when Man of Rabinal refers to the “12 lords” of the Rabinal nation. This is all the more striking because 13 is more prominent in Mayan numerology than 12.

In the matter of the 12 Golden Eagles and Jaguars, the point to consider is that Lord Five Thunder wonders whether Kaweq

mi xchul okoq ki tz’aqat,
will help them reach their perfection,
ki molaj.
their completion.

It turns out that when Kaweq helps them at the end of the play, he does so by joining them in a ritual that ends with his execution. Implicitly he becomes, in spirit,

the thirteenth member of their company. As for the 12 lords referred to by Man of Rabinal, their number is corroborated by another source. In 1537, when Fray Bartolomé de las Casas founded a mission at a valley site adjacent to the present town center of Rabinal, he persuaded the people of the Rabinal nation to move down from the surrounding hills. To do so, he had to deal with the lords of 12 different divisions of the nation (Ximénez 1977: 214). The archaeological evidence is consistent with this account. Overlooking the valley are two hilltop sites that date from the end of the pre-Columbian period. One of these is known today as *Chumi Tinamit* or “Above the Town,” and the other is *Kaqyug’* or “Red Mountain,” named in the play as the site of Lord Five Thunder’s citadel. Both sites have palaces and temples arranged around six separate plazas, for a total of 12 (Fox 1987: 220). So the composers of the *Rabinal Achi* script were able to make use of the number 12 without contradicting the facts of their own history and culture, whatever their counterparts may have done in the other towns where dances of the trumpet were once performed.

In both *Carlo Magno* and *Rabinal Achi*, the action centers not around the hero (if heroes are supposed to be protagonists) but around a remarkably fierce warrior who happens to be on the wrong side. In *Carlo Magno* this warrior is Fierabrás, who is in the service of a Turkish emir and in some versions is his son. His counterpart in *Rabinal Achi* is Kaweq of the Forest People, who is (or once was) in the service of the lords of the K’iche’ kingdom and who (as we have seen) is modeled in part on the son of a famous K’iche’ king. By chance the name of the Turkish emir is Balán, which is close to *balam*, a pan-Mayan term for “jaguar.”⁹ The composers of the *Rabinal Achi* script or one of its predecessors must have intended an allusion to Balán when they wrote the lines in which Kaweq identifies his lords. Instead of having him name *K’iqab* (Many Hands), *Kawisimaj*, and *Istayul*, the three lords who would have been served by his main historical counterpart, they substituted names from a previous era in which *Balam* was favored as a name:

Balam Ajaw,
Jaguar Lord,
Balam Achi,
Jaguar Man,
Balam K’iche’.
Jaguar K’iche’.

Unlike Kaweq, Fierabrás has no known historical counterpart (Knott 1957). He is described as a giant and the strongest man in the world. The original meaning of his French name is “flails his arm,” and that is what he does in battle in *Fierabras* (Koenig 1956). Kaweq has many victories to his name, but he is no giant, at least not in *Rabinal Achi*. But he could have been portrayed differently in versions of the play that were once performed in towns other than Rabinal. However that may be, he has escaped the world of drama and now enjoys a second life in the realm of folktales, where he possesses superhuman strength. One of the phrases by which he

is addressed in the play, *oyew achi* or “brave man,” has become *Yewachi*, the name by which he is known to storytellers. According to a tale told in Rabinal and the neighboring town of Cubulco, the people of Rabinal moved to their present location in order to escape the nocturnal attacks of Yewachi.¹⁰

Some versions of *Carlo Magno*, like *Rabinal Achi*, open with a speech by the chief antagonist, who seeks to provoke a fight. Fierabrás addresses his challenge to Carlo Magno but is eventually answered by Oliveros, one of 12 knights in the service of Carlo Magno. Kaweq expresses his desire to chop through the root and trunk of the Lord of the Kawuq and Rabinal nations, meaning Lord Five Thunder and his entire lineage, but it is Man of Rabinal, a warrior in the service of Lord Five Thunder, who answers him. Both challenges are followed by one-on-one conflicts, and in both cases the means of expression alternates back and forth between the physical and verbal planes.

When Fierabrás questions Oliveros concerning his identity he gets an evasive response at first, but Oliveros eventually gives him a straight answer. Kaweq and Rabinal play out an analogous exchange but in reverse, with Rabinal asking the questions and Kaweq evading them. Fierabrás, who makes no secret of his own identity, brags about his past accomplishments as an enemy of Christendom, which include destroying Rome, killing the pope, and making off with a collection of holy relics. Kaweq, on the other hand, speaks of his own deeds only in response to accusations by Man of Rabinal, admitting to having invaded Rabinal territory with an army of K'iche' rebels, attacking Lord Five Thunder while he was taking a bath, and placing a curse on the land where the people of Rabinal have their fields.

When, at length, Fierabrás is defeated, he is so impressed by the gallantry of Oliveros that he insists on becoming his comrade-at-arms. The situation with Kaweq is reversed, in that he should have been acting as Rabinal's comrade in the first place, but chose instead to become his enemy. Rabinal expresses his dismay in these lines:

Xa pe xa lal ri kanuto'.

What a terrible joke you're someone I ought to help out.

Xa pe xa lal watz.

What a terrible joke you're my elder brother.

Xa pe xa lal nu chaq'.

What a terrible joke you're my younger brother.

Fierabrás fervently desires to accompany Oliveros to the court of Carlo Magno, whereas Kaweq suggests that before he appears at the court of Lord Five Thunder, Rabinal should gallantly allow him to pay a farewell visit to his homeland. When Fierabrás meets Carlo Magno he asks to be baptized, whereas the only requests Kaweq makes of Lord Five Thunder are the last requests of a man who knows that he will soon lose his head.

In an episode that takes place after the encounter between Oliveros and Fierabrás, Carlo Magno sends a knight named Ganalón to the Turks as an emissary. Ganalón threatens them with war if the holy relics are not returned, but when they offer him

great riches he agrees to act as their secret agent. On his return he persuades Carlo Magno to send Roldán and other knights to Roncesvalles, where the Turks will be waiting in ambush. The resultant battle is enacted in the course of the play, but an analogous episode in *Rabinal Achi* is assigned to a time preceding the events of the play. It took place when Kaweq was an ally of the lords of the Rabinal nation, who feared an attack by their Uxab and Poqomam enemies. Kaweq, as Man of Rabinal reminds him, accepted the task of going before the enemy lords as an emissary, warning them to stay inside their existing territory. While he was on this mission he failed to observe that their forces were numerous and on the move, which resulted in disastrous Rabinal losses.¹¹

Man of Rabinal stops short of accusing Kaweq of conspiring with the Uxab and Poqomam lords, but he finds it hard to believe that their preparations for war could have escaped Kaweq's notice. Kaweq does not admit to conspiring with the enemy lords, but he does portray them as making what could be interpreted as an attempt to bring him over to their side. They contrasted their own easy life with the constant struggles of Rabinal subsistence farmers, he says, describing themselves as

xe u mujibal q'uq',
 shaded by quetzal feathers
xe u mujibal raxon
 shaded by glistening green
xe u q'anal peg
 under the golden pataxte
u q'anal kakow
 under the golden cacao
xe q'ana pwaq
 under the golden money
xe saqi puwaq.
 under the silver money.

The “quetzal feathers” and “glistening green” are the leaves of the large trees that shade orchards of *pataxte* (a lesser grade of cacao) and *kakow* (cacao proper), whose seed pods served as a currency throughout Mesoamerica. In Kaweq's reply to these lords, as he recounts it, he did not take them to be hinting at an offer of money. Instead, he told them that they appeared to be threatened by the diligence of the Rabinal people, and that they probably wanted to see them greatly reduced in numbers and territory. He does not say whether the discussion went any further, and Man of Rabinal does not pursue the matter. Whether Kaweq failed to observe the enemy's true strength or else conspired to keep it a secret, Rabinal holds him responsible for the disaster that followed.

Both plays have an episode in which a prisoner of war interacts with an unmarried woman who is a member of the court of his captors. In *Carlo Magno* this takes place at the fortress of the enemy emir, Balán, while in *Rabinal Achi* it takes place at the fortress of Lord Five Thunder. The prisoners in question are Oliveros, who is captured (along with several other knights) after his defeat of Fierabrás, and Kaweq. While

imprisoned, Oliveros and his companions are secretly visited by Floripes, who is the daughter of Balán and (in some versions) the sister of Fierabrás. In the Rabinal play it is Kaweq who makes the first move, and he does so openly. As one of his last requests, he asks Lord Five Thunder to allow him to dance with the Mother of Quetzal Feathers, who is (at least implicitly) the lord's daughter.

Floripes wants to free Oliveros and the other prisoners and take the holy relics to the court of Carlo Magno, there to marry Guy de Borgoña, a knight she somehow met at the time of the destruction of Rome. In effect the relics will serve as her dowry, whereas the marriage of Mother of Quetzal Feathers, Mother of Glistening Green would mean a transfer of precious objects in the opposite direction, from the family of her husband to that of her parents. She remains unmarried throughout the play, but she is named, as we have seen, for the feathers and jade that would constitute her bride price.

In both plays there is an enemy who is defiant to the end, meeting death in the final scene. In *Carlo Magno*, during a battle in which the Christians are victorious over the Turks, Balán refuses baptism, curses Mahoma, and dies from a wound inflicted by a sword or (in one version) hangs himself. In *Rabinal Achi*, when Kaweq appears at the court of Lord Five Thunder, he passes up any chance he might have had for mercy and accepts death by decapitation.

Looking back over the various points of comparison, it seems clear that the early contributors to the composition of *Rabinal Achi* gave considerable thought to the relationship between the story they set out to tell and the story told in *Carlo Magno*. But the result is not so much a synthesis of the two stories as it is a Mayan story, retold so as to counterpoint and even contradict the Spanish one. *Rabinal Achi* presents a confrontation between two warriors in which one is reluctant to reveal his identity to the other, as in *Carlo Magno*, but it is the loser who is reluctant rather than the winner. The loser, rather than being an enemy who becomes an ally, is a former ally who has become an enemy. And instead of humbling himself before the winner's lord and beginning a new life, he proudly accepts his fate.

There is more to the story, but it is not in the script. Kaweq, after kneeling at center stage while axes are aimed at the back of his neck, rises to his feet and joins all the other characters in a final dance. For the local members of the audience this is neither an anachronism, nor a resurrection, nor a curtain call. All the characters in the play are regarded as historical figures, and all are regarded as long dead. The actors have been impersonating them, honoring them by making their presence visible and audible. In the final dance, which repeats the dance with which the play began, the actors return their characters to the status they all share in today's world, which is that of ancestors. They can be prayed to during the rest of the year, when the costumes have been put away, but they will appear only in dreams.

Notes

- 1 All quotations from the K'iche' text of *Rabinal Achi* are based on field recordings I made in 1988, 1989, and 1999; the line breaks are based on deliberate pauses in the

performance. In the orthography, b is glottalized; j is like Spanish j; l is like Welsh ll; q is like Hebrew qoph; r usually has a single flap as in Spanish; tz is like English ts in “sets”; x is like English sh; the glottal stop is indicated by ’; and all other consonants are approximately as in English. Vowels are similar to those of Spanish. Stress is nearly always on the final syllable of a word.

- 2 I thank Stephen Houston for calling my attention to this stairway. A description and drawing of the texts on the stairway are included in Houston 1993: 108, table 4-1, and figure 4-11; on the history of Dos Pilas see Martin and Grube 2000: 56–67. A carved lintel in Temple I at Tikal shows Jasaw Chan K’awil riding a litter in a procession that may have been part of a larger pageant dramatizing the story of a recent military victory in the year 695 (Martin and Grube 2000: 45).
- 3 For an introduction to the Mayan writing system, see Coe and Van Stone 2001. The major steps in decipherment took place in the 1950s.
- 4 For more on dances of the trumpet and attempts to suppress them, see D. Tedlock 2003: 199–204.
- 5 The ax scepter and the small round shield are discussed in greater detail in D. Tedlock 2003: 130–5.
- 6 The Pérez manuscript has been published by Breton (1994). He claimed that this manuscript has a lineage independent of Brasseur de Bourbourg’s 1862 book (Breton 1994: 30–7), but I have shown that Pérez matched the content of his first page to that of the book’s first page, that he reproduced some of the book’s typographic features, and that he even included one of the book’s page numbers (D. Tedlock 2003: 216–20).
- 7 For more on the script of *Rabinal Achi* and its relationship to what happens in actual performances, see D. Tedlock 2003: chap 4.
- 8 My descriptions of *Carlo Magno* are based on the three scripts published by Morales Hidalgo (1988).
- 9 Balán, as the name of the Saracen emir in *Fierabras*, may be one of those names jongleurs invented for their heathen characters. The only Balán known to have played a role in the history of Rome was a horse ridden by Belisarius, who captured Rome in 537 (Knott 1957: 508).
- 10 The folktale reported here is known in both Cubulco (Shaw 1971: 55–6; Arnauld 1993: 94), which borders on Rabinal, and Rabinal itself (Arnauld 1993: 94).
- 11 This episode may be based on an historical event that took place long before the lifetime of Kaweq’s main historical counterpart (D. Tedlock 1996: 178).

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History, Myth, and Social Function in Southern African Nguni Praise Poetry

RICHARD WHITAKER

The kind of lengthy oral heroic epic found in Europe, Asia and other parts of the world has never existed in southern Africa.¹ Instead, the most widely practiced, and best-known type of oral performance is *izibongo*, “praises,” or the praise poem. In this chapter I discuss aspects of Nguni, that is, Zulu and Xhosa, praise poetry of the east coast of South Africa, and I try to show how this poetry preserves history, or, in the view of its practitioners and audiences, actually constitutes history.

What is *izibongo*, “praise poetry”? Essentially, it is a system of naming, of fixing the character and individuality of a person through the spoken word. This is parallel to the ways in which an individual is identified within a literate society by a title (Ms, Mrs, Mr, Doctor or Professor), a business card, a sign attached to the door, a certificate hanging on the wall, listings in a university calendar or a professional register, through a curriculum vitae, or, for a well-known public figure, a substantial entry in *Who’s Who*. It is precisely this naming, identifying role that was played by praises when Nguni society was still an oral one, and that remains important now, even when the majority of Xhosa and Zulu people are literate.

Izibongo can be applied to inanimate things or animals (especially cattle, because of their importance in Nguni society), but their most significant use is their application to human beings. They can be “boasts” – as in the Anglo-Saxon tradition – made up by individuals about themselves, or they may be applied to a person by their friends, relatives, or people who know them. Praises seek to identify something essential and characteristic about the person praised, thereby giving them a social identity. They encapsulate a striking physical characteristic, some aspect of a person’s moral nature or personality, a well-known achievement, or some famous action in which they were involved. At its simplest a praise may be little different from an alternative name, or nickname; at its most complex, it may extend to hundreds of lines and include snatches of narrative. As we shall see, “praise” is actually a misnomer, since a person’s *izibongo*, though most often positive, can also sometimes be satirical or critical.

An example of a praise at its simplest would be *Nyengana*, a name given to the first missionary among the Xhosa, for his shining bald head. More complex is the following, recorded from MaMhlalise Mkhwanazi, a Zulu woman, and aimed at some unidentified old man – we can clearly see here the pungently satirical quality that can inform *izibongo*, as the speaker assumes the character of her target:

I am what kind of Bull is it
that mounts outside its own kraal
but is useless at home.
Hah! What do you say to that
you old Khandempemvu [grey-headed] fellow!
(Gunner and Gwala 1991: 205)

An example of a “boast” would be the following self-praise of a rural man who left the mines, only to return when he saw the poverty back home. In his *izibongo* he sees himself as moving between two worlds, like the amphibious crab:

The bull that left [sc. the mines] carrying baggage
but was brought back by his eyes.
The crab that skirts the water’s edge.
(Wainwright et al. 1978: 21)

Right at the other end of the scale from these personal praises we find the praises of a great chief, such as Shaka, or of his successor, Dingana, which amount to hundreds of lines.

Very importantly, when Nguni society was still fully oral, a person’s praises were that part of them that survived their death; they were what constituted the memory of that person and their identity, when they were gone. This is very close to the archaic Greek notion of *kleos* as what is “heard” about you, what keeps your memory alive. The famous Zulu praise poet, Magolwana, beautifully expresses this idea in the lines:

Kof’ abantu, kosal’ izibongo,
Yizona zosale zibadabula
Yizona zosale zibalilel’ emanxiweni.

Though people may die, their praises remain,
these will remain and bring grief for them,
remain and lament for them in the empty homes.

(Rycroft and Ngcobo 1996: 25, lines 73–5 of
Dingana’s praises as edited by them)

Clearly it is here, in its memorial function, that praise poetry intersects with history and becomes of particular interest to this volume’s discussion.

From this point on I shall concentrate on praise poetry in its most public and political manifestation, looking at Zulu royal praises and their relation to history.

I shall use as a case study the praises of Shaka, who, through alliances, conquest, and absorption expanded the Zulu “polity” – to use the term preferred by Shaka’s most recent and most comprehensive chronicler, Dan Wylie (2006: 45 with n. 8) – in the years between about 1815 and 1828.²

Still the standard version of the praises of Shaka is the 450-line poem, presented in Zulu with English translation by Trevor Cope in his 1968 *Izibongo: Zulu Praise-Poems*. But in this case it is worth giving the full title of Cope’s book, since it hints at the tortuous process by which originally oral performance was reduced to writing and then print: *Izibongo: Zulu Praise-Poems, Collected by James Stuart, Translated by Daniel Malcolm, Edited with Introductions and Annotations by Trevor Cope*.

Who were these various people mentioned in the title? Stuart was a colonial official, born in Natal in 1868, 40 years after the death of Shaka. He grew up among Zulu-speakers and was completely fluent in the language. After he had held various judicial, administrative, and military posts, the culmination of his career was his appointment as Natal Assistant Secretary for Native Affairs in 1909. He died in 1942 (Webb and Wright, I [1976]: xiii–xv). What Stuart is famous for today is the mass of oral testimony he collected in Natal between about 1888 and 1912. The manuscripts of the Stuart Archive constitute an invaluable source for Zulu history and culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Important for us is that, in the course of his collecting, Stuart gathered and transcribed some 360 texts of *izibongo*. Making the assumption that literates invariably make – or at least have made until recently – Stuart treated these praises as if they were variants of recoverable original versions (Vail and White 1991: 58). In the process of combining and editing he reduced them from 360 to 258 praise poems of various individuals.

Daniel Malcolm, a Chief Inspector of Bantu Education for many years, became the first lecturer in Zulu at the University of Natal, and translated the Zulu texts of Stuart’s praise poems into English. When Malcolm died in 1962, Trevor Cope, later Professor of Zulu at the same institution, saw to the publication of just 26 of Malcolm’s English translations, with Stuart’s Zulu texts on the facing page.

To return to the praises of Shaka in particular, although Cope does not mention the fact, his ultimate source, Stuart, had created the praise poem *Shaka* from no fewer than 33 distinct versions. The scholar Duncan Brown (1998: 81–2) writes how Stuart, in a handwritten note,

reveals the Western assumptions about “aesthetic unity” and “conciseness” which underpinned [his] intervention: “Tshingana, Ndabuko, Mkungo and Mgidhlana’s versions collated and made into a single piece. All repetitions struck out. Best and most definitive verses adopted” (File 29a: KCM 23481).

The editing process did not end there. Cope in turn altered Stuart’s Zulu text, switching around the order of some lines and adding others from elsewhere in Stuart’s notes (Brown 1998: 82–3); and he “polished” Malcolm’s translations (Cope 1968: viii), which had themselves already often employed “elegant variation” in dealing with the typical repetitions of the oral style.³

The praise poem *Shaka*, then, though orally derived, is very far from being the text of a specific oral performance. It does, however, display many features that are characteristic of Nguni oral praise poetry. I shall quote the opening of the poem and then discuss some of these features:

Dlungwana son of Ndaba!
 Ferocious one of the Mbelebele brigade,
 Who raged among the large kraals,
 So that until dawn the huts were being turned upside-down.
 He who is famous as he sits, son of Menzi, 5
 He who beats but is not beaten, unlike water,
 Axe that surpasses other axes in sharpness;
 Shaka, I fear to say that he is Shaka,
 Shaka, chief of the Mashobas.
 He of the shrill whistle, the lion; 10
 He who armed in the forest, who is like a madman,
 The madman who is in full view of the men.
 He who trudged wearily the plain going to Mfene;
 The voracious one of Senzangakhona,
 Spear that is red even on the handle. 15

One notices the allusive, essentially non-narrative, quality of this poetry, and the way in which one brief unit of praise follows the next without any necessary connection between them.⁴ Fundamental to Nguni praise poetry is the range of concrete metaphors – above all, animal metaphors – that it employs. In the lines quoted, Shaka is a sharp axe, a spear, a lion. Elsewhere in his praises he is an oncoming storm, hazy as the shadows of the mountains, flaring fire, the ocean with rolling waves; but he is also a buffalo, viper, hawk, leopard, elephant, and porcupine. Narrative does occur, but in brief bursts, as in the following lines (2–4):

Ferocious one . . .
 Who raged among the large kraals,
 So that until dawn the huts were being turned upside-down.

If one asks of these Shakan praises, To what extent do they preserve history? one would have to counter with further questions: What does one mean by “history” here? And, according to whose conception of history? We need to take seriously the words of the most recent, and most thorough, historian of the Shakan period, Dan Wylie (2000: 62):

When [European colonists] write about themselves, “history” is the appropriate discourse, with its commanding metaphors of progressive change, cause-and-effect, and linear chronology. In the Shakan context, “history” begins with the white man’s arrival. Given its peculiar empirical premises, it must. This mode of historicity demands documentation, great leaders, bounded state systems, dates, and discrete events. The pre-textual past of the Zulus offers such a “history” negligible purchase.

Because of this “negligible purchase,” because the praises of Shaka do not offer “linear chronology” or relations of “cause-and-effect,” colonial historians have in the past generally ignored praises and other oral testimony as historical sources, choosing to rely instead on the diaries, journals, and letters of the earliest white settlers in Natal, documents recently shown to be, in important respects, biased and unreliable.⁵ Symptomatic of this neglect is the way that praises – not only those of Shaka, but also of other chiefs – are handled in the great edition of the James Stuart Archive, edited by Webb and Wright. In the introduction to the first volume the editors state their policy (I [1976]: xv; their italics):

We have classed as original *historical* evidence all testimony in which the informants were recounting, or commenting on, the past, or discussing the issues and events of their own day. Excluded from our selection are . . . legends, myths, praise poems . . . While these latter categories may all yield information useful to the historian, they require interpretation by specialists with training and skills which the editors do not adequately possess.

And so, again and again in the pages of the edited archive we find passages like the following testimony from Baleni ka Silwana:

Tshaka’s father was Senzangakhona ka [son of] Jama ka Bayeni ka Punga ka Mageba. I cannot give more. I am quite sure Bayeni was Ndaba’s father. Nandi was buried at Mteku, Eshowe district. Tshaka was *dark brown*, not very *light*. . . <Praises of Shaka omitted – eds.>⁶

We can see very clearly in this editorial policy a clash between competing ideas of history. Whereas Stuart’s Zulu informants repeatedly and, for them, quite naturally move between “prose” and praise poetry in giving their versions of the past, to the editors, in the passage quoted above, it is the “prose” sections which are to be classified as “original *historical* evidence” (their emphasis), while the praises only “*may* . . . yield information useful to the historian” (my emphasis).

It must be acknowledged that, for most oral poetry (and this includes the praises of Shaka) corroborating evidence, in the form of oral testimony and interpretation, is essential for historical understanding. Thus, in his edition of Zulu praise poetry, Trevor Cope heavily annotates the text of *Shaka*, seeking to illustrate, or to extract from its allusive language, historical facts for which we also have other evidence. For example, on the lines

He who armed in the forest, who is like a madman,
The madman who is in full view of the men

Cope comments: “A reference to the story that Shaka, as a young man, had confronted and killed a madman who was terrorizing the district.” This is not something a historian could have inferred without independent oral evidence.⁷ If supportive, interpretative material of this kind had not survived, how much history of the

conventional kind could scholars extract from Shaka's praises? Rather little I suspect. They would be left with the information that Shaka was irresistibly powerful, that he conquered many chiefs, whose names are given, and that he greatly extended Zulu territory.

But it is time to attempt a different historical perspective on the *izibongo* of Shaka, the perspective of those who produced and those who, as it were, consumed the praises. This involves looking at the *izibongo* no longer as *text*, but as *performance*. When performed, the words of the praises – the only aspect we have so far emphasized – constitute just one part of a totality, a totality that embraces the performer, and the audience, and the circumstances within which the performance takes place (Scheub 1987). By means of his costume, strong guttural tone, emotional delivery and impassioned movements and gestures, as well as his command of the language and especially the metaphors of praise, a successful poet will be able to evoke a powerful, vocal response from his audience, so that they themselves become part of the performance. And it is in this context of performance that we can see much more clearly the social-historical function of praises for the people who use them.

Vail and White have argued convincingly in their book, *Power and the Praise Poem* (1991), that *izibongo* deal above all with relations of power. As their case-studies show, this is not a simple matter. In the case of a chief, performance of his praises may represent the voice of the people affirming his lineage and his power by connecting him with the history of the chieftainship while simultaneously criticizing aspects of his behavior that fall short of the standards set by his ancestors.⁸ If one defines the role of the public intellectual as being "to speak the truth to power," then this is also, ideally, the role of the praise poet. Less ideally, if a chief can enforce his will, he may be able to control performance of his praises in such a way that all criticism disappears, and the praises become straightforward propaganda, purely memorial, a way of using the past to bolster his power and authority.⁹ Criticizing the procedure of editors of praise poetry like Cope, Vail and White (1991: 73) insist that,

by reducing the texts to a series of complex historical "allusions," the . . . editors have missed the opportunity of demonstrating that history as metaphor is not simply history as code. It is history as drama, evaluation, and judgment: history with the metaphysics included.

They are pointing here towards the different kinds of history that *readers* of praises, on the one hand, and *participants* in praising, on the other, may derive from this poetry.

To return to the case of Shaka. It is impossible at this distance in time to reconstruct the circumstances under which his praises were performed, and thus the ways in which they handled the relations of power between himself and his people. From lines such as the following,

King, you are wrong because you do not discriminate,
Because even those of your maternal uncle's family you kill
(348–9)

or

Overflowing one that disregards warnings;
 Lazy one that eats the corn of the diligent ones
 (404–5)

we would gather that there were within his society critics of Shaka's behavior. It has been suggested that the former criticism may actually date from Shaka's own time (Vail and White 1991: 67 with n. 64). But it is equally possible that some of the *izibongo* critical of Shaka may have been added after his death, during the rule of his brother, Dingana, who had Shaka killed, and who afterwards spread anti-Shakan propaganda (Wylie 2006: 424–5, 508–10).

It is impossible, then, to be sure what political and historical meanings the praises of Shaka bore in their original performance. But I would like to look at one instance in which, a century later, Shaka's praises seem to have been used to reinforce a particular historical interpretation of his reign and of Zulu "nationhood." In the 1920s, in response to repressive legislation by the South African parliament,¹⁰ an upsurge of Zulu nationalism occurred, organized around the Zulu royal house and the cultural-political body Inkatha, which was founded in 1923 (Vail and White 1991: 65; Hamilton 1998: 169–70). And determined attempts were made to overcome divisions between Christian Zulus and their traditionalist non-Christian counterparts. It was in this context that, in 1927, E. W. Grant recorded on dictaphone praises of several Zulu chiefs, including Shaka. Grant gives us at least some sense of the performance, when he writes (1993: 86):

As the recital proceeded the imbongi [praise poet] became worked up to a high pitch of fervour, and was evidently living again in the glories of the past. His voice became loud and strong, his face was uplifted. Shield and stick would be suddenly raised and shaken in the air. Gestures became more and more frequent and dramatic.

The man who performed the praises of Shaka for Grant was an *imbongi* called Gwebisa. Virtually all the praises and all the traditional metaphors that Gwebisa produced on this occasion can be found elsewhere, in other versions of Shaka's praise poem. But what is striking about this particular performance is that it omits all criticism of Shaka; it leaves out many of his military conquests; and it stresses his defensive role, through several repetitions of the praise,

He is like the cluster of stones of Nkandhla,
 Which sheltered elephants when it had rained
 (lines 17–19, 35–6, 56–7, 60 =
 Cope [1968: 94–5], lines 87–8)

Most striking of all, though, is the fact that Gwebisa comes up with a new praise, found here for the first time, when he says of Shaka, "He welded together the Zulu nation" (line 74). In the words of Vail and White (1991: 70),

the program of reinterpreting Shaka's place in Zulu history has been carried out without introducing new material. Gwebisa has remained largely faithful to the stock of metaphors which draw their authority from the fact, or at least the belief, that they can be referred back to actual historical events by those who know best. Gwebisa's *izibongo* is constructed from the same "evidence" as earlier versions, but he has reinterpreted it to provide historical and moral reassessment appropriate to his audience.

What Gwebisa has done is to reinterpret history in the light of contemporary political tendencies, downplaying conflict and division, and making Shaka the architect of Zulu unity.¹¹ The means may be different, the relationship to audience different – direct in the one instance, indirect in the other – but in the end the praise poet's uses of oral history do not seem different in kind from the uses of written history in the Western tradition. Neither oral nor written history remains uninfluenced by the power structures and the political tendencies of its time.

In conclusion, I discuss briefly a concrete example of the different ways in which history can be presented and conceptualized in a written and in an oral tradition.¹² The Xhosa poet David Livingstone Phakamile Yali-Manisi¹³ performed praises at a conference banquet in 1988. I was present at this performance. And if I were to give a conventional, "historical" account of the occasion, I would say the following:

The banquet for participants at the conference, Oral Tradition and Education, took place at the University of Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal), South Africa, in the east-coast city of Durban, on the evening of July 8, 1988. Men and women from different countries and various southern African communities attended, and the guest of honor was the then Vice Chancellor of the university, Pete Booysen. At the time of the conference South Africa was ruled by a minority, white-dominated regime that had declared a State of Emergency to deal with ever-increasing resistance to its rule. Under this regime, the funding and opportunities for education were hugely skewed in favour of the white minority.

But how did the praise poet conceptualize this occasion? He set the moment powerfully in historical context, but did so dynamically, in performance, through his clothing, his gestures, movements, tone, and words. Manisi often in performance spoke of himself as "destitute," a "tramp" (Opland 1988: 123, 184, 192), one of the dispossessed speaking to the powerful. And so he appeared in performance on this occasion in a shabby brown jacket and open-necked shirt, without a tie, among the smart conference guests. Manisi's tone, movements, and gestures all created an atmosphere of dramatic intensity – particularly in the middle of the performance, when his slow stalking movement mimicked the behavior of the secretary bird, hunting prey. Since the public praise poem normally singles out persons of authority, Vice Chancellor Booysen, as the most powerful individual present at the banquet, became the focus of Manisi's performance. Booysen was incorporated into the metaphorical world of the praise poem, as a "python," "whose lair overhangs the waters of Durban Bay" – this because of the physical position of the Durban campus of the University of Natal, on a hillside overlooking the harbor. Elsewhere in the poem,

using animal metaphors involving the paradise flycatcher, a hoopoe, cobras, sharks, a secretary bird, a sacrificed ox, Manisi addressed himself to the guests, reflecting poetically on the troubled political context of the conference, the unequal distribution of wealth and educational opportunity in South Africa, and linking together past, present and future. This was indeed, in the words I quoted earlier, “history as drama, evaluation, and judgment.”

Notes

- 1 However, a few *written* epics using southern African oral materials have been published; see, for example, Kunene (1979); or, for the Xhosa tradition, the examples given by Jeff Opland (1983: 215–30; 1998: 38–9).
- 2 At this point I should enter a caveat. Although so-called “royal” praises of great chiefs have been the type most studied and written about by scholars, and although I shall be focusing on them in this chapter, we should not lose sight of the fact that all sorts of individuals within Nguni society have praise poems, including people who have tended to be marginalized, such as women, and men who do not see themselves as warriors; see the interesting chapter by Liz Gunner (1995); also Gunner and Gwala 1991: 32–6.
- 3 For instance, where lines 327–34 of the Zulu text of *Shaka* repeat eight times the word *wadl(a)* (“devoured”), Malcolm/Cope vary the translation to read “captured” and “ate up,” as well as “devoured.”
- 4 What Opland (1998: 110) writes of Xhosa praise poetry is true also of Zulu: “The world of the Xhosa oral poem is not linear, as is narrative, but spatial. A Xhosa izibongo is a meadow dotted with flowers: there are many different colours, patches of uniform colour here, a swathe of the same colour over there.”
- 5 “It can be more than adequately documented that the self-proclaimed eyewitnesses of Shaka’s reign were concertedly lying in order to cover their own unsavoury deeds. Beyond the reach of European norms, they could do whatever they liked, and in the absence of alternative accounts, they could say practically whatever they liked” (Wylie 2000: 68).
- 6 Webb and Wright, I (1976): 16; editors’ italics, representing phrases written in Zulu by Stuart.
- 7 Another example, from the *izibongo* of Dingiswayo (the chief in whose service Shaka learned his military skills): it would be hard for a historian outside the tradition to interpret praises such as “Chief who has spear-wounds in his side / His side is red with wounds” or “The duiker [buck] that got up with a spear in its back” (Cope 1968: 122) without the information (based on oral tradition) that Cope gives: “[Dingiswayo] aroused the suspicions of his father, the chief, who ordered that he should be attacked by surprise and killed. He managed to escape with a spear embedded in his back.” (ibid.: 118).
- 8 See Brown (1998: 108): “Recording history is not the primary function of the izibongo of the chief, but is a vital part of the form’s function: to maintain the chiefdom, establish the lineage of the ruler, and assess his conduct.”
- 9 “At its best, praise poetry is lively, mischievous, dense with history refined to metaphor, and capable of redefining the terms of authority and the qualities of the nation . . . At its worst, praise poetry can be obsequious in its content and profoundly conventional in its expression” (Vail and White 1991: 56).

- 10 In particular the 1913 Land Act that set aside just 7½ percent of South Africa's land area for exclusive occupation by the African majority.
- 11 Cf. Vansina 1985: xii: "Yes, oral traditions are documents *of the present*, because they are told in the present. Yet they also embody a message from the past, so they are expressions *of the past* at the same time. They are the representation of the past in the present" (his italics). I follow Vail and White (1991: 64–70) in this interpretation of Gwebisa's *izibongo* of Shaka. Their account is, however, vitiated by a number of small errors in their reading of E. W. Grant's original text, on which they base themselves. They write of "Nongema" (66) rather than "Nongoma," and twice misread "Gcwabe" as "Gewabe" (69). More seriously, they cite a phrase from Gwebisa's performance (as printed by Grant 1993: 97) which strengthens their argument, but which is a misquotation of the text: lines 75 and 77 do not read "*allied* the regiments" but "*rallied* the regiments" (my emphases).
- 12 At this point in the Brown University conference presentation, I showed a video of the oral performance of a Xhosa praise poem by David Manisi. The video, with explanatory pamphlet by Wandile F. Kuse, was published by the University of Natal Oral Documentation and Research Centre in 1989. Manisi's performance here is just one example of the dynamic nature of southern African praise poetry, a form that has repeatedly adapted itself to changing circumstances.
- 13 On Manisi, see Opland 1988: *passim*, but esp. chs. 6–9; also Lenta 2006.

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Epic and History in the Arabic Tradition

DWIGHT F. REYNOLDS

Poetry has been celebrated in Arab culture from the earliest periods onward as its most prominent and most respected art form – music, painting, architecture, and other forms of literature have never come close to rivaling its status. But to understand poetry purely as an “art form” would be a grave misinterpretation, for in early Arab culture poetry played a highly significant role as a mode of communication that was considered more reliable than prose and which therefore occupied a noteworthy place in the transmission of oral history. The role of poetry as an authoritative voice in the oral performance of historical narratives greatly influenced the overall development of Arabic written literature and imbued early Arabic historical writings with certain very distinctive characteristics. Arabic epic poetry, which appears to have emerged in the tenth to twelfth centuries CE, continued to use a number of these “oral” characteristics, while the writing of history developed in new ways that were more purely literate in nature.¹

Ancient Arabic poetry was composed in some 15 different meters (defined as recurring patterns of long and short syllables), in verses of two equal hemistichs separated by a medial caesura, with mono-endrhyme. The same meter and rhyme were maintained throughout each composition; multi-rhymed poems were unknown, as were compositions that included more than one poetic meter. Since in modern times end-rhyme has become so widespread that it is often thought to be virtually synonymous with the concept of poetry, it should be noted that Arabic was unique in the ancient world in its use of obligatory end-rhyme. Although a number of the surrounding societies used various types of meter in the composition of poetry, none of the neighboring cultures or languages – Akkadian, Aramaic, Babylonian, Berber, Coptic, Egyptian, Greek, Hebrew, Hittite, Latin, Persian, Sanskrit, Sumerian, and so forth – used end-rhyme in a regular manner. Among the ancient Arabs the repetition of a rhyme-word was deemed a “weakness” or “fault” (unless it was used

with an entirely different meaning), which led to a natural limitation on the length of individual poems. The longest of the ancient Arabian odes that have survived range from 80 to somewhat over 100 verses in length. Some sense of the overall attitude towards poetry in ancient Arabia can be detected in two early terms: poetry was known as *kalām manzūm* (organized words), in contrast to prose which was referred to as *kalām manthūr* (scattered words). Both of these terms ultimately derive from the image of pearls being “organized” or “strung” onto a string versus unstrung pearls which were “scattered” or “loose.”

Given the strictures of fixing utterances into both meter and rhyme, the ancient Arabs correctly understood that poetry was more easily memorized and underwent far less change in transmission than prose. It is not surprising therefore that the oldest historical narratives preserved in Arab culture were composed in *prosimetrum* (alternating passages of poetry and prose).² These early tales of tribal raiding, battles, and other significant events were transmitted orally for a period of one to three centuries before being written down in the eighth and ninth centuries and compiled into anthologies known as the “Days of the Arabs” (*Ayyām al-‘Arab*) because each discrete narrative had been given a title such as “The Day of Basūs,” which most often referred to the geographic locale of the central event.³ The narratives are recounted primarily in prose, but at key junctures verses composed by one of the participants or by a witness describing the events are quoted, sometimes at length. The poetry, understood to be historically more trustworthy than prose because it changed less in oral transmission, added authority to the prose narrative it accompanied, while the narrative provided the context for the composition of the poems and the details which allowed them to be fully and properly understood. The authenticating verses tended to draw from a rich traditional repertory of poetic imagery, while the prose accounts carried much of what would now be termed the historical information. The two modes existed in complete symbiosis.

Although no society can endure for centuries without undergoing transformation, the social conditions of the tribal communities of the Arabian Peninsula remained remarkably little changed from the pre-Islamic period until the end of the nineteenth century, and poetic traditions very reminiscent of these ancient prosimetric narratives have been collected there and studied by modern scholars. Much as the fieldwork of Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord (Lord 1960/2000) provided new ideas about the composition of ancient epic poems, recent ethnographic research has brought dramatic new insights to the study of ancient Arabic poetry. The role of poetry in tribal histories was summed up in a remarkably succinct manner, for example, by a Jordanian Bedouin sheikh speaking with anthropologist Andrew Shryock. While arguing that his clan’s history was true whereas the narratives of a rival clan were clearly falsified because they were not accompanied by poems to demonstrate their veracity, the sheikh stated categorically: “il-gissa illay ma ‘ind-ha qasīd kidhib,” “The story that doesn’t have a poem is a lie” (Shryock 1997: 258).

From the work of Saad Sowayan (1985) on the colloquial poetry of the Arabian Peninsula it has become clear that the preservation of historical events in poetry occurs not only because poetry is considered more reliable and enduring, but also

because in tribal settings poetry is an integral part of the events themselves. In one series of poems analyzed by Sowayan, recounting events from the nineteenth century, the sheikh of a tribe who had been removed from power sent to his two sons to come and help him regain his position. The message to his sons was itself initially couched in poetry so that it could be transmitted faithfully by a messenger; for this very reason it also survived and lived on in the historical memory of the tribe. When the sheikh and his two sons did indeed prevail and he was returned to power, an announcement of their victory was sent out to all the neighboring tribes – in poetry, of course. When drought then threatened and the sheikh decided to invade the territory of a neighboring tribe, he first sent an ultimatum – in verse – to that tribe, ordering them to cede their pasturelands or prepare for battle. After the battle had been fought and the new territories had successfully been seized, the sheikh sent yet another announcement in verse to the surrounding tribes declaring his dominion over the area he had won in battle. Although these poems were composed in the late nineteenth century, they help us understand the well-known phrase in Arabic, dating back some 1300 years or more, that “Poetry is the registry of the Arabs” (“*al-shi‘r dīwān al-‘Arab*”). We might even translate this statement as “Poetry is the writing of the Arabs,” for whenever one might in other circumstances expect a written document of some sort – such as a declaration of war, an ultimatum, an announcement of victory, or a plea for help – these oral tribal histories instead present a poem in which these statements have been preserved. In such social contexts it is easy to understand that a historical narrative unaccompanied by poems might well be suspected of being a lie.

The study of living poetic oral historical traditions has also demonstrated the variety of textual transformations that can occur in oral transmission from reciter to reciter and generation to generation. Though poems tend to be transmitted as coherent units over time, a poem can occasionally slip free of its original context and mistakenly be cited in the context of a different historical event, or, if its original context has been forgotten, a new narrative might be created retroactively to explain the events recounted in the poem (Bailey 1972). These and a variety of other processes of oral composition and transmission assist in explaining a number of textual problems in the early Arabic historical tradition where the same poem can occur in more than one historical narrative or the same narrative at times occurs in different sources with different poems at key points. One explanation of this “slippage” is that the poems are often of a rather generic or even formulaic nature – descriptions of battles where swords flash in the sunlight, the dust from the horses is so thick that it darkens the sky at high noon, and warriors sell their dear souls for the cheapest of prices, are easily applicable to any number of events. It is usually the prose narrative that carries information which is difficult to versify, such as full names of persons, tribes, and geographic locations. As Sowayan notes (1985: 52):

Although nomadic poetry deals mainly with tribal raids and forays, it is not straightforward historical narrative. Poets make only allusions and cryptic references to the incidents celebrated in their poems. Therefore, a poetic reference usually alternates

with a prose narrative which recounts the raids and battles celebrated in the poetry and serves to put the poetry into its proper context and to illuminate its allusions. The poetry does, however, serve as an authentic document substantiating the incidents in the narrative and enhancing their circulation and preservation in public memory.

What is most significant for the purposes of my present discussion, however, is that in the early Arabic tradition poetry was not held to be in opposition to history but rather was an integral part of it. Not only were critical statements and declarations in daily life made in poems but poetry was preserved in early historical narratives as a particularly authoritative and trustworthy voice – indeed, the voice that gave the accompanying prose narrative its claim to veracity.

Early Genres of Arabic Historical Writing

With the spread of Islam and the rapid expansion of Arabic literacy in the seventh to ninth centuries, new genres of historical narration emerged in Arabic. One of the first new types of narrative was the *sīra*, the earliest example being that of the Prophet Muhammad (Guillaume 2001). The term derives from a verb meaning to go or to travel, but the nominal form *sīra* referred not only to a path or way, but also to a person's conduct, behavior, and deeds, and is therefore often translated into English as "biography." These lengthy biographical narratives, however, were relatively rare and the figures about whom they were composed were almost all religious figures or political leaders. The term seems to have implied not simply a biography, but rather the narrative of an "exemplary" life, the life of someone worthy of being imitated, and it is probably in this sense that, beginning in the Middle Ages, the term also came to be applied to heroic epics.⁴

Other forms of historical narration focusing on political and military events were collectively known as *ta'rikh*, a term that originally had to do with setting the first day of the lunar month, and a related body of biographical information was referred to as *ʿilm al-rijāl* (lit. "knowledge of men"). One of the most striking aspects of these early historical accounts is the enormous efforts expended in the preservation of the first-person voice in the form of the original quotations uttered by participants and witnesses. In historical and religious writings, for example, a highly developed tradition of oral transmission and written documentation evolved. When first-person quotations were cited, they were accompanied by a scholarly apparatus that gave the names of each of the transmitters – the *isnād* – from the speaker (or hearer) of the original statement to the author, followed by the phrase "He said," which introduced a verbatim first-person statement, as if we the readers were present at the event and hearing the original speaker's voice. It is clear from the widespread use of this technique that the first-person voice was the voice of authority in early Arabic oral and written culture. Third-person narration appears to have been regarded as somewhat suspect and whenever there might be question or doubt about a detail of history, religion, poetry, law, or even grammar, writers resorted to the citation of

first-person statements from respected sources as the ultimate means of asserting the authority and veracity of the information they were presenting.

Another noteworthy aspect of the early Arabic historical tradition is its multivocality, for historians often juxtaposed conflicting first-person reports about a given event in their works.⁵ It was not uncommon for a historian to collect from both oral and written sources a dozen or more versions of a single significant event and make only the briefest statement about which of these he himself found to be the most reliable. The art of writing history was the craft of compiling all the potentially veracious accounts of history and presenting them to the reader. What modern Westerners consider “normal” history, that is, univocal narrative history in which the author speaks through an omniscient, anonymous voice, was a later development in the Arabic tradition, and for quite some time was considered a derivative, secondary literary form, a type of “summary” of the more authoritative sources that offered conflicting first-person accounts attributed to specific individuals with full documentation of their transmission.

The use of poetry as a means of documenting and establishing the veracity of historical narratives began to diminish in written historical accounts with the growth of a truly literate culture in the ninth and tenth centuries, although it has continued to appear in Arabic historical writings in this role, or as an occasional embellishment, until the present. By the ninth and tenth centuries, however, the records of the new Islamic empire were being kept primarily in written form so that historians could now in many cases turn to documents for the texts of important messages, declarations, and so forth, and written letters had superseded memorized poems as the primary means of communication among leaders and their functionaries. Veracity and authority could now be claimed through the verbatim quotation of written documents, and the role of poetry as the raw material of history began to wane. By the late Middle Ages writing history in the voice of an anonymous, omniscient third-person narrator had become quite widespread, as had another relatively new genre in Arabic, the chronicle.

The Arabic Epic Tradition

Arab culture possesses a particularly rich tradition of epic poetry with well over a dozen examples, thousands of pages in length, found in late medieval manuscripts (Lyons 1995). Arabs do not, however, seem to have composed works of this prodigious size in the pre-Islamic period; indeed, the first textual references to these epics do not appear until the eleventh century, and the oldest surviving manuscripts date to the thirteenth. In many ways, however, the epics can be seen as a continuation of the earliest oral historical traditions for they are composed in prosimetric form with alternating sections in prose and verse like the ancient “Days of the Arabs.” Also like the early Arabic tradition, first-person utterances by characters within the epic are often cited in verse prefaced by formulae such as “Listen now to what he said,” or “And he said,” followed by a statement in the present tense (“O men of the

Banī Hilāl, harken to my words!’”) so that we the readers are “present” at the event itself. A number of these epics recount the deeds of early Arab heroes from the pre-Islamic period, and they eventually came to be referred to generically as *sīra*, or “exemplary biography,” the same term that had earlier been used in reference to the biography of the Prophet Muhammad.

The majority of the Arabic epics appear to have been composed from three to five centuries after the death of their main characters (though it is also possible that they existed in purely oral form for substantial periods without leaving traces in the written record), and nearly all of them are indeed based on historical figures. All but one of the epics focus on the life and deeds of a single hero (similar to *Roland* or *Beowulf*, for example), while the “Epic of the Banī Hilāl” (*Sīrat Banī Hilāl*) presents a tribal history centering on a constellation of principal heroes (more comparable in that regard to the *Iliad* or *King Arthur*). It is intriguing, therefore, that it is this latter poem that is now the last surviving epic in oral tradition in the Arab world. Already in the 1830s the British Arabist Edward W. Lane reported that there were some 50 professional epic-singers who performed the *Epic of the Banī Hilāl* in Cairene cafés, 30 more who performed the *Epic of al-Zāhir Baybars* (a thirteenth-century ruler of Egypt), and only three who performed the *Epic of ‘Antar ibn Shaddād*, a pre-Islamic hero (Lane 1846). Performers of the *Banī Hilāl Epic* sang their poems to the accompaniment of the Egyptian *rabāb* (a one- or two-string spike-fiddle) without the use of a written text, while those of *al-Zāhir Baybars* recited their tales in a regular speaking voice rather than singing, and raconteurs of the *Epic of ‘Antar ibn Shaddād* read their narratives aloud from books – three completely different modes of epic performance co-existing in a single context! Although there is ethnographic evidence of performances of the *Banī Hilāl Epic* throughout the Arab world as late as the end of the nineteenth century, by the second half of the twentieth sung versified performances of the epic were found only in Egypt in two distinct regional traditions: in the south the epic is sung in short-versed (8–10 syllables) rhymed quatrains, while in the north it is sung in lengthy (26–30 syllables), mono-endrhymed, medial caesura verses, which is the basic form of classical Arabic poetry dating back to the fifth and sixth centuries, and is also the only form attested in the manuscript tradition of the epic (Reynolds 1995; Slyomovics 1987).

The Banī Hilāl in History

Historical references to the Banī Hilāl Bedouin tribe are scattered and sparse except for the one cataclysmic event for which they are best known, their conquest of North Africa in the eleventh century (sometimes referred to as the “second Islamic conquest”) and their dominion over much of what is now Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria for just over 100 years before they themselves were destroyed by the eastward-moving Moroccan Almohad dynasty in the 1160s. Their conquest and brief reign are credited by some historians with having abruptly broken the economic and social progress of North African culture and so devastated the region that it never fully

recovered, and by others with having “arabized” and more profoundly “islamicized” many regions, particularly the hinterlands of the coastal areas which to that point had remained essentially Berber and became Muslim only somewhat superficially. Many scholars also believe that all the Arabic-speaking nomadic tribes of North Africa are in some way descendants of the Hilālī invasion. It remains difficult, however, to assess the impact of the Banī Hilāl on the region, because all historical documents relating to their migration, conquest, reign, and final destruction were written by or for their enemies and successors. To the best of my knowledge, there exists not a single written document composed by a leader of the Hilālī tribal confederation. Written history, therefore, not surprisingly offers a decidedly negative view of the Banī Hilāl, while oral tradition, ironically, has transformed them into some of the best known and most widely celebrated heroes of Arab culture!

The single most important historical source for the conquest of the Banī Hilāl and their century-long period of power is the *Kitāb al-ʿIbar* (*Book of Admonitions*) by Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406).⁶ According to Ibn Khaldūn, the Banī Hilāl were first displaced from their homeland in the Arabian Peninsula in the region of the Hijāz and the Najd (near the cities of Medina and Mecca) by the Egyptian Fatimid caliph to punish them for having taken part in the Qarmatian rebellion against the Fatimids. They are said to have been relocated to the southernmost region of Egypt, even though this did great damage to the area. The Cairo-based Fatimids were then faced with another rebellion, this time in North Africa in the region of modern Tunisia, on the part of their vassal Muʿizz ibn Bādīs, who had transferred his loyalty from the Fatimid caliphate to the rival ʿAbbasid caliphate of Baghdad. The Fatimid vizier al-Yāzūrī is said to have come up with the idea of sending the Banī Hilāl off to North Africa to fight Muʿizz ibn Bādīs and his allies, the Sanhāja Berbers, with the offer that they could then rule as vassals of the Fatimids over all the territory they conquered. Legend has it that the Fatimid caliph al-Mustansir offered a gold coin to every able-bodied man who would cross the Nile and invade North Africa. When the advance forces of the Banī Hilāl had achieved their first victories and won great amounts of booty, word of this went back to the remaining Hilālīs in Egypt who then wished to join them. But the Fatimid government now *charged* every individual a gold coin for transportation across the Nile, thereby (as Ibn Khaldūn notes approvingly) more than recouping the original investment they had made by paying the earlier forces.

The Sulaym tribe from the Hilālī confederation remained in what is now Libya, but the others pressed on to Tunisia in the year 1051–2 and descended upon it “like a swarm of locusts damaging and destroying all that lay in their path” (Ibn Khaldūn 1847–51: I, 34). The Riyāh clan were the first to reach the region and the ruler, Muʿizz ibn Bādīs, tried to win them over by inviting their leader, Mūsā ibn Yahyā, to his court, giving him his own daughter in marriage, and then attempting to turn them against rebels in the western part of his realm. Mūsā is said to have agreed, but the Banī Hilāl instead began to rampage through the countryside and defy the army of Muʿizz ibn Bādīs. In retaliation, Muʿizz ibn Bādīs arrested the brother of Mūsā ibn Yahyā and held him prisoner. In the meantime Muʿizz rallied together what

forces he could from throughout his territories, including a force of 1,000 horsemen from the Zanāta Berber nomads.

Mu‘izz ibn Bādīs went out with his assembled forces to face the Banī Hilāl; however, those of his troops who were of Arab blood (descendants of the first Arab invaders of North Africa four centuries earlier) soon betrayed him and crossed over to the Hilālī side. The battle was fierce and the Sanhāja Berbers alone are said to have lost 3,300 men. Here Ibn Khaldūn stops his prose narrative to validate this information by referring to a poem:

It was about this day of battle that ‘Alī ibn Rizq of the tribe of Riyāh uttered his poem (though some say it is by Ibn Shaddād [great-grandson of Mu‘izz ibn Bādīs]) which begins thus:

*The image of Umayma [my beloved] came to me;
[but I had departed] and our mounts were galloping at fast pace.
Yes, the son of Bādīs is an excellent king!
By my life, however, he has no [true] men!
Thirty thousand of them met us [in battle], but
Three thousand of us defeated them – what a delusion!*
(Ibn Khaldūn 1847–51: I, 33; Ibn Khaldūn 1971: VI, 15)

In effect, once the tide of battle began to turn, the Berber tribes of the Sanhāja and Zanāta also abandoned Mu‘izz, so that he had no choice but to flee and to barricade himself within the city walls of Qayrawān. There he was trapped while the Hilālīs laid waste to the surrounding countryside. The Hilālī clans divided up the territories previously controlled by Mu‘izz ibn Bādīs. Eventually an agreement with the Sanhāja Berbers was reached in which they ceded all of the countryside, but themselves retained control of the cities and paid tribute to the Hilālīs. Having neutralized the Sanhāja Berbers, the Hilālīs now turned their arms against the Zanāta Berbers of western Algeria. The Zanātī ruler of Tlemcen sent his vizier, Abū Su‘dā Khalīfa with a major force to halt their advance, but they were routed and he himself died in the battle (in the epic tradition, Abū Su‘dā Khalīfa has been transformed into the most powerful enemy of the Hilālī tribe and the narrative’s greatest villain).

Ibn Khaldūn reports, “All of these events deeply disturbed the prosperity of North Africa, devastation spread everywhere, and highwaymen cut off the main routes and robbed travelers” (Ibn Khaldūn 1847–51: I, 37). He later describes the period of Hilālī rule as a period of injustice and pillage and refers to them as bandits and highwaymen, decrying the lack of a centralized government and a single leader: “This Arab race never had a leader capable of controlling and containing it” (ibid.: 44).

In 1152–3, the Moroccan Almohad dynasty invaded and captured much of Ifrīqiyyā. For several years, the Banī Hilāl endured their domination but then revolted in a great battle against the Almohads. Having decided to win or die, legend has it that they hamstrung their mounts so that they would have no means of escape and for three days they held fast in fierce fighting. But on the fourth day, having suffered

enormous losses, they retreated in complete disorder. The Almohads captured their womenfolk, their animals, and their most famous leaders and warriors. In addition, they pressed their pursuit of the battered retreating forces of the Hilālī tribe for a great distance until there was nothing left of the previously invincible fighting force. Thereafter the Hilālī tribal confederation ceased to exist and the surviving groups were forced to recognize the authority of the Almohads, and indeed, they later fought as devoted partisans of their cause. A number of them traveled to Spain and fought for the Almohads against the Christians there. In an interesting observation, Ibn Khaldūn notes that, "The calls that [the Almohad leader] 'Abd al-Mu'min sent to them to urge them to participate in this religious act were sometimes composed in verse" (Ibn Khaldūn 1847–51: I, 47).

Throughout his account of the history of the Banī Hilāl, Ibn Khaldūn makes reference to poems as critical statements or utterances (such as the call to arms mentioned above, or the promise of North Africa by the Fatimid Caliph before their migration) or as an authenticating source for his information. When he gives the names of the Hilālī leaders, for example, he concludes his list with the statement: "All of the persons we have just named are mentioned in the poems of these Arabs" (Ibn Khaldūn 1847–51: I, 38). A number of these figures are also characters in the Hilālī epic poem, including Hasan ibn Sarhān, Salāma ibn Rizq (better known as Abū Zayd), Diyāb ibn Ghānim, Zayd ibn Zaydān, Zayd al-Hajjāj ibn Fadl, and others. In fact, the degree to which Ibn Khaldūn's historical narrative is or is not drawn from the oral materials he collected from remnants of the Banī Hilāl tribe remains unclear.

But Ibn Khaldūn did not blindly accept all information that reached him in verse. In the following passage it is evident that as a historian he grappled with the issue of how much credence to give to the oral legends and poems that had emerged among the fragmentary Hilālī groups in the two centuries since their defeat at the hands of the Almohads. On the one hand, he was fascinated by these materials and collected them assiduously; on the other, at times he found them unbelievable, deemed the poetry to be corrupt, and dismissed it as a reliable basis for writing history. His thoughts and arguments straddle the two (at times conflicting) worlds of literate historiography and oral epic narrative:

Among the Hilālīs there are preserved very strange tales about their arrival in Ifrīqiyā [modern Tunisia]. They hold that the Sharīf ibn Hāshim, ruler of the Hijāz (called, according to them, Shukr ibn Abī l-Futūh), contracted an alliance with [the Hilālī leader] Hasan ibn Sarhān, whose sister, al-Jāzya, he married, and from that marriage there was born a son named Muhammad. Quarrels and disagreements having arisen between the Sharīf and the members of the [Hilālī] tribe, the latter decided to migrate to North Africa. But first they used a ruse in order to bring [al-Jāzya], the wife of the Sharīf, with them. Upon their advice, she asked permission from her husband to visit her parents. He consented and accompanied her to the place where the [Hilālī] tribe was encamped. They then departed, taking the Sharīf and his wife with them, with the supposed intention of traveling to a place where they would, the following day, devote themselves to the pleasure of the hunt, and they would rejoin the camp as soon as the tents had been

set up there. As long as they were in the territory of the Sharīf they concealed their true intentions, but as soon as they reached lands that were beyond his jurisdiction, they sent him off [alone] in the direction of Mecca, his heart filled with sadness at seeing the person he so loved taken away from him. His wife continued to feel for him a love as strong as that which tormented him, and she eventually died, a victim of her love.

Even today, among the Hilālī tribe, they tell stories of these two lovers [so beautiful] as to make one forget those of Qays and Kuthayyir [famous Arab lovers of the pre-Islamic period]. They recite as well a large number of verses attributed to the Sharīf and his wife. Despite the fact that these fragments do not lack a certain regularity and cadence, as well as a certain facility of expression, one does notice in them interpolations, alterations, and falsified passages. The grammatical rules of case-endings are completely ignored (though we have already established in the introduction to this work that the absence of grammatical inflection in no way hinders precise expression of thought). It is true that educated people, city dwellers, do not like to listen to such poems, because the grammatical case-endings are not always correct. Such a fault, in their view, radically subverts precision and clarity – but I am not of their opinion.

As we have already stated, these poems include numerous interpolations and, in the absence of any proofs that could attest that they have been transmitted without alteration, one should not lend them any credence. It would be completely different if we were certain of their authenticity and had the assurance that oral tradition had preserved them with their original integrity, because then one would find in them passages which would confirm the stories of that tribe's wars with the Zanāta, and help determine the names of their leaders and establish the circumstances regarding them. In our opinion it is impossible to accept that the texts of these poems have been preserved intact; we even believe that any cultivated person would easily recognize some of the interpolated passages. That is all that can be said on the subject.

Whatever the case may be, the members of the Banī Hilāl tribe are in agreement, and have been for several generations, that the story of the Sharīf and al-Jāzya is true, and whosoever would be so brazen as to contest its authenticity or even express any doubts, would risk being accused of madness or ignorance, so widely believed is this tradition among them.

(Ibn Khaldūn 1847–51: I, 41–2; Ibn Khaldūn 1971: VI, 18)

In the modern epic version of this tale, the “ruse” that is used to lure the Sharīf out of his territory is more elaborate. The Hilālīs camp each night at a spot in the desert where there is a small body of water and a palm tree. Each day the Hilālī men accompany the Sharīf out hunting, but while they are gone, the womenfolk pack up the camp and move further into the desert, carrying with them the palm tree and many skins filled with water with which to recreate the pond. At the end of each day, the Sharīf returns from the hunt near nightfall believing himself to be back at the same place because he finds the same palm tree and same small pool of water near his tent. Once they have lured him beyond his realm, the trick is revealed and he is forced to return alone, without his beloved al-Jāzya. This may in fact be the version that Ibn Khaldūn heard among the Arab nomads outside the walls of Tunis six centuries ago, though his summary of it does not include all of the details. It is noteworthy that Ibn Khaldūn cites this love story as one of the legendary aspects of oral tradition that

he finds problematic, for one of the primary differences between written history and oral epic is precisely that the epic offers a more personalized version of history where the motivations for great events are often rooted in the emotions and desires of individuals, whereas the written accounts see the same events as the result of political struggles among larger social units such as tribes and kingdoms.

Ibn Khaldūn was not only the author of the primary historical source for the Hilālī conquest of North Africa, but he was also the first writer to transcribe fragments of the Hilālī epic itself. His "Introduction" (*Muqaddima*), to which he refers in the quote above, is a remarkable study of the philosophy of history and the study of human civilization (Ibn Khaldūn 1958). Long before Spengler or Toynbee, Ibn Khaldūn developed a theory for the cyclical rise and fall of civilizations based upon the concept of *'asabiyya* which can be translated as "group feeling" or "social cohesiveness." His observation was that new dynasties typically arose among "barbarians" or "tribal groups" who came from the deserts and attacked the urban centers. They managed to conquer these fortified cities and their well-organized armies due to their group's superior sense of "social cohesiveness" in which individuals worked fully for the larger social unit of the tribe. After conquering these centers of urban culture, however, they eventually grew soft and lax and lost the "group feeling" and "cohesiveness" necessary to keep them in power, so that they in turn later fell victim to the next wave of conquerors from the deserts whose tribal cohesiveness was stronger than theirs.

Although this is the central thesis of Ibn Khaldūn's famous "Introduction," he also touches on many other aspects of human culture. Towards the end of this work he makes what was then a very radical argument, namely, that colloquial Arabic poetry, though it did not use the strict meters and case endings of classical Arabic poetry, was nevertheless beautiful and expressed deep thoughts. To demonstrate his point that colloquial poetry could be equally as beautiful as classical poetry, he cites as examples several pages of poetry about the heroes of the Banī Hilāl tribe that he had collected outside the city walls of Tunis, including fragments from the tale of the Sharīf and al-Jāzya (Ibn Khaldūn 1958: III, 415–23). These are the "strange tales" and poems that he refers to in the long quotation cited above. Although it is unclear whether at that point these poems were individual poems and tales or whether the overall structure of the epic had already emerged, the fragments he cites are so clearly from the epic tradition as it has come down in oral tradition until today, that specific scenes and even specific oral formulae and verse fragments can be matched up with recordings made in Egypt in the late twentieth century.

After the initial fragments transcribed by Ibn Khaldūn there is a lack of written evidence about the epic for several centuries. Around the end of the eighteenth century, however, thousands of pages of manuscript from the epic were written down, most probably in the region of Tunisia (Ahlwardt 1896; Ayoub 1978: 347–63). Given the dialectal features, unusual misspellings, and orthographic errors in these texts, scholars have concluded that they were most probably taken down from oral recitation, rather than being a text redacted by a literate author. At this point the narrative is indisputably an epic, and it closely resembles the epic as it was performed

in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in various regions of the Arab world. The most likely trajectory for the growth of the epic is that it had its earliest roots in the tribal poetry and oral historical narratives of the Banī Hilāl themselves. Normally, of course, members of one tribe do not memorize and recite or sing the poetry of another tribe, but the near total destruction of the Banī Hilāl confederation at the hands of the Almohad dynasty seems to have made their tales available and appealing to diverse populations of the Arab world. In retelling the story of the Banī Hilāl, one was not praising an existing opponent but rather praising the feats of bygone heroes. It is unclear from the examples transcribed by Ibn Khaldūn in the fourteenth century whether the oral tradition at that point more closely resembled tribal historical narratives interspersed with poems, or a full-fledged epic. The poems he cites have a decidedly more narrative form than the descriptive lyric poems of the ancient Arabs; so it is possible that he captured the tradition in its period of coalescing into a massive, overarching poetic narrative. Whatever the case with his examples, it is clear that by the eighteenth century this transformation had taken place and that the larger narrative structure now dominated and organized the individual scenes, poems, and tales.

The Epic in Performance

In the village of al-Bakātūsh in northern Egypt there were, in the early 1980s, 14 households of hereditary professional epic singers, families in which epic singing was the sole occupation of the menfolk, though females supplemented the family income with a variety of odd jobs such as selling vegetables in the marketplace or weaving baskets from palm fronds.⁷ The form of performance practiced in this region was prosimetric (alternating passages of spoken prose and sung poetry) in which the poet accompanied himself on the two-string coconut-shell spike-fiddle (*rabāb*), occasionally with a second *rabāb*-player for larger performances. The epic was nearly always performed interwoven with other genres of poetry, particularly songs of praise to the Prophet Muhammad (*madh*) and a short lyric form known as *mawwāl*. The poetic form of the epic was that of classical Arabic poetry (lengthy verses divided into two equal hemistichs by a medial caesura with mono-endrhyme), but the language used was the local colloquial dialect. Because two different dialectal pronunciations were common in the region, the poets were adept at singing in both (for example, with the letter *qāf* pronounced either as a glottal stop or as “g”).

It was widely recognized that poets were of different quality, and only five poets in this community were considered to be “master poets,” in part because they were believed to control the repertory of the entire epic, which ran anywhere from 80 to 140 hours in length of performance. The epic appears never to have been performed from beginning to end, however, but rather in episodes which lasted anywhere from four to 12 hours depending upon the complexity of the narrative and the amount of detail given by the poet. Thus the “length” of the epic as a whole is in some sense a purely theoretical construct; the figures cited above are the result of adding together the total number of hours of various poets’ episodes sung on different occasions. In

the past, poets had sung in a wide variety of contexts including harvest festivals, saints' festivals, weddings, in private homes, cafés, and other public spaces, but by the 1980s they were surviving almost entirely from performances at weddings and in private homes. It was typical for poets who had been engaged to sing for more than one night to break off the story at its most dramatic moment in order to lure the audience back the following evening. All the poets expressed a strong aversion to singing during daytime; traditionally the epic was sung only at night. Electricity arrived in the late 1970s and television followed only a few years later, greatly diminishing the demand for evening performances of the epic. Public schools provided new opportunities for the children of epic singers and made it impossible for young boys to spend years as apprentices traveling to performances with their fathers or other male relatives. By 2000, there were no longer any performing epic-singers left in the village.

Very similar to the Yugoslavian traditions studied by Parry and Lord (Lord 1960/2000), the poets did not "memorize" the epic, but rather learned a massive amount of information – such as names, places, events, and plots – and became adept at re-composing the tales with more or less variation depending upon the circumstances. Somewhat surprisingly, "hack poets" who had only learned a few episodes of the epic tended to sing their repertory with little variation, at times achieving nearly verbatim repetition even in performances separated by several months. The "master poets," on the other hand, produced fascinatingly fluid performances in which they would readily interweave improvised greetings to audience members, expand or contract scenes at will, retell the same scene in an entirely different "tone" (comic, serious, or romantic, for example), and even manipulate the plot of the epic in order to comment on local social or political situations. As one poet stated regarding a lengthy sequence of battles between one of the main heroes and the seven kings of an opposing tribe, "I can kill them off in half an hour or take a whole night doing it!" At the same time, in interviews and discussions of performances they maintained a clear idea of what was, and what was not, part of the epic.

Within the epic material itself, there was also a distinction between what might be termed "recitativo" – passages that describe stock scenes such as journeys, battles, banquets, messages, marriages, horses, or maidens – and "arias" – those passages which recount the most dramatic scenes of the epic. Although master poets constantly adjusted the amount of detail in the "recitativo" passages, they would usually sing the "arias" nearly verbatim and would defend their versions of those significant scenes against criticism from the audience (whereas criticism of the "recitativo" material would sometimes result in the poet re-singing a passage according to the dictates of an audience member who might have complained, for example, that the poet had left out some detail). Thus a well-known scene such as the dramatic poem of grief that the hero Rizq, the Valiant Son of Nāyil, sings to a wolf in the desert when he believes his wife and son to be lost forever, varied far less from one performance to another by the same poet, and even from poet to poet within this community, than other more generic passages. Such scenes were also at times sung alone, detached from the larger narrative of the epic, at the request of audience members.

This may lend credence to the theory that some narrative ballads originated as scenes in longer poems.

Of particular interest is the fact that these poets were able to sing their narrative with a focus on one or another of the main heroes. For Egyptian villagers the main hero of the epic is without question Abū Zayd, the witty, cunning, well-spoken, "Odyssean" figure of the tale, one of whose most common epithets is "father of ruses" (*abū l-hiyāl*). But in neighboring Libya and among certain Bedouin groups in Egypt, there is a much stronger appreciation of Diyāb, the hot-headed, temperamental, fearsome warrior who represents a more "Achillean" figure. The poets of al-Bakātūsh said that they were adept at recounting certain episodes, so that Diyāb figured more prominently than Abū Zayd, when they sang for a group of migratory Arabs from the eastern Sharqiyya province, who crossed the Delta region twice each year with their flocks and set up tents in the open lands when they stopped near the village. These Arabs were also the only audience for whom the poets occasionally sang during daytime because at their weddings and other celebrations the nighttime was devoted to dancing "the striking of palms" (*darb al-kaff*), in which the men formed lines and sang as a chorus while keeping time by clapping their palms together, and the young women took turns dancing in front of them. Although I was never able to attend or record such a performance, it seems clear from the poets' testimonies that they could produce on demand a closely related version of the epic that shifted the heroic focus of the narrative from one main character to the other.

These epic singers used a limited repertory of a few dozen melodies which they varied at will. There was no sense among them that a particular passage in the epic should be sung to a specific melody. However, part of the knowledge of the epic trade internalized by singers as children during their period of apprenticeship was the rhyme scheme of every episode. It was widely known, for example, that the episode of the "Birth of Abū Zayd" began on the rhyme -āXih (where X represents any consonant, so that *rāyih*, *wādih*, *fālih*, etc. are all acceptable rhymes) and continued in that rhyme until the scene where the Qadi (religious judge) Fāyid makes a speech to the Sharīf of Mecca proposing that the hero Rizq, the Valiant Son of Nāyil, marry the Sharīf's daughter, at which point the rhyme changed to -ālḥā (*nālḥā*, *hālḥā*, *majālḥā*, etc.). The "oral formulaic" system of these poets did not generate the same ideas in different metrical contexts (as Parry and Lord defined the oral formula in the Yugoslavian tradition), but rather generated the same ideas with different end-rhymes. Stock scenes such as battles and desert journeys were found in a variety of rhyme contexts using slightly different vocabulary, different metaphors, or merely different word-order to generate similar descriptions with different end-rhymes.

At one point in my field research I was able to provoke and record the transformation of one such scene from one rhyme-scheme to another. Using a somewhat dishonest pretext, I would occasionally ask a singer to re-sing a scene claiming that the tape had gone bad or that I had forgotten to flip it to the other side. One time, however, I asked the poet with whom I worked most closely and who acted as my primary teacher not only to re-sing the scene he had just sung (a desert journey), but to do so on a *different* rhyme. He looked me squarely in the eye and asked me what rhyme

I wanted. He had sung the scene on the rhyme –ām and I asked him to sing it on the rhyme –ār. He put out his cigarette and, without hesitating, picked up his instrument and re-sang about 20 minutes of poetry, changing the end-rhyme of each verse while retaining the ideas and most of the same images. I was fascinated and immediately wanted him to sing it again on yet another rhyme, but the audience members objected saying that they had already heard this section twice and did not want to hear it again. When I listened to the recording the next morning I discovered to my chagrin that my teacher had deftly reprimanded me in the opening verses of the second version for interrupting the performance, but I had been too taken up with listening to the rhymes to catch this. I later apologized and our sessions continued normally after that.⁸

History According to the Epic

Modern Egyptian performances of the epic recount much the same basic history as that summarized in the works of the fourteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldūn: the tribe's departure from the Arabian Peninsula, their migration and conquest of North Africa, and their eventual annihilation. It is not entirely possible, however, to separate the written historical version and the oral epic since it appears that Ibn Khaldūn himself drew extensively upon oral tradition (a technique, we saw, that was common in Islamic historiography of the period). Nevertheless, the historical version and the narrative of the epic differ on several major counts. The epic, for example, states that the motivation for the great westward journey of the Banī Hilāl was a prolonged drought in their homeland in the Arabian Peninsula. It does not mention the Qarmatian rebellion or the forced migration to southern Egypt ordered by the Fatimid caliph of Cairo. Nor does it contain the famous scene in which the Fatimid Sultan offers the Banī Hilāl fighters a gold dinar to cross the Nile and invade territories further west; this anecdote, however, may be a later embellishment: it first appears in Ibn Khaldūn's work some three centuries after the supposed event (above). At the very end of the tale, the epic also makes no mention of the Moroccan Almohad dynasty; its conclusion is even more tragic in that civil war breaks out among the clans of the Banī Hilāl and they destroy each other in a cataclysmic Armageddon-like battle. Since it is quite possible, however, that internecine quarrels were part of the reason that the Almohads were able to defeat the Banī Hilāl, the two versions are not necessarily irreconcilable.

To understand these "erasures" of medieval dynasties, such as the Qarmatians of the Arabian Peninsula, the Moroccan Almohads, and even the Fatimids (who ruled in Egypt but practiced a form of Shi'ite Islam rather than the Sunni Islam of modern Egyptians), we need to consider the context of oral folk history in Egypt. Since these dynasties have almost completely disappeared from the corporate popular memory of the Egyptian rural and working classes in all genres of oral tradition, it is hardly surprising to find that their traces have dropped out of the historical narrative of the epic as well.

A more intriguing aspect of this phenomenon of “erasure” is that Egyptian versions of the epic retain no sense of the fact that the wars of the Banī Hilāl in North Africa were waged by invading Arabs against indigenous Berbers. Since there are no Berbers in Egypt (except for a tiny population in the Siwa Oasis in the western desert), this ethnic dimension of the central struggle in the epic is not tied to any modern reality or concern and thus is simply not relevant to Egyptian audiences. In North Africa, however, where the struggle between Berber and Arab cultures remains very much alive, stories of the Banī Hilāl retain this ethnic confrontation as a primary element of the narrative.

Conversely, memory of the Crusades has been embedded and preserved in the epic, though only tangentially: in their long, circuitous route towards Tunisia, the Banī Hilāl tribe passes through the Crusader kingdom of Jerusalem and fights the “Franks.” While the fame of the Qarmatian, Almohad, and Fatimid dynasties faded in popular memory for lack of relevance, the Crusaders left a far more permanent imprint on the Middle Eastern imagination. For this conflict resulted in the (albeit temporary) loss of Jerusalem (the third holiest city in Sunni Islam after Mecca and Medina) to invaders of another religion and in the emergence of a new Muslim hero of legendary proportions in the figure of Saladin. We might well hypothesize that the Crusades continued to function in Arab folk history as a symbol of the Arab struggle with the modern West that gained new prominence with Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 and the ensuing spread of Western colonial control. There are no modern descendants of the Qarmatians, Almohads, or Fatimids whose presence would render their memory relevant to modern Egyptian audiences, whereas the “descendants of the Crusaders” continue to be perceived as a threat to Arab identity and Islam.

Returning to history as reported by Ibn Khaldūn, we observe a complicated interrelation between even some of the finer details of the historical account and the narrative of the epic. As noted above, a number of the primary characters of the epic are mentioned by Ibn Khaldūn, though in some cases their roles are rather different. For Ibn Khaldūn, for example, Abū Su‘dā Khalīfa was the vizier of the Sultan of Tlemcen in western Algeria, whereas in the epic he appears as the ruler of Tunisia and the primary foe of the tribe. Yet in both cases it is the defeat of Abū Su‘dā Khalīfa that marks the completion of the Hilālī conquest of North Africa. Ibn Khaldūn reports that Diyāb was the guide who led the Banī Hilāl in their migration and conquest, but in the Egyptian versions of the epic this role is attributed to Abū Zayd; yet evidence for competing versions of the epic focused on these two heroes perhaps suggests that Diyāb was accorded a central role in the region of Tunisia, as he still is today, while Abū Zayd occupied the place of honor in Egypt.

Perhaps the most significant overall difference between the written and oral versions of the history of the Banī Hilāl is that the oral epic’s tale relentlessly focuses upon individual heroes rather than corporate social units such as tribes and dynasties. It tells of the births of these heroes and their youthful exploits fighting battles and wooing beautiful maidens whom they bring back to the tribe as brides. The motives

for their adventures are rooted in individual honor, glory, jealousy, lust, retaliation, and so forth. While the written historical narrative provides glimpses of the role of individuals (for example, when Mu'izz attempts to win over Mūsā by giving him his daughter in marriage, and later imprisons Mūsā's brother when he fails to live up to his part of their agreement), it is primarily a tale of politics and military encounters described in terms of larger social units.

Three basic principles can thus be extracted regarding the relationship between the oral epic tradition and the medieval written historical accounts. First, the epic has not preserved the memory of some of the most powerful political dynasties involved in the history of the tribe, probably because, no longer tied to a reality that concerns modern audiences, they lost relevance in the popular historical imagination. Second, some details (such as names, places, or battles) known from the medieval historical works are found in the epic as well, though frequently displaced or reassigned to different roles. And finally, even where the epic retains elements of the accepted political history of this era, its version constantly valorizes personal motives and characteristics (like bravery, cowardice, jealousy, love, or honor) over political maneuverings or power strategies. In short, the epic retains a reflection of history that focuses on events and lessons that are relevant to its current audience, issues of ethical personal behavior, perseverance against misfortune, and the preservation of one's honor. Written history narrates the rise and fall of dynasties, the epic the rise and fall of individual heroes.

Conclusion

Written historical sources about the Banī Hilāl tribe were composed by or for their opponents and successors; the Hilālī voice is absent from the written record. In medieval documents they are universally portrayed as rapacious desert Arabs who laid waste to much of North Africa after defeating the two great Berber confederations of the Sanhāja and the Zanāta, but were eventually themselves subdued by the more powerful Almohad Berber Empire. The written record recounts primarily a political narrative of corporate entities such as tribes, clans, and kingdoms, with only occasional focus on individuals. The epic tradition in contrast, portrays the Banī Hilāl as heroes (though not without certain human flaws) and is above all the story of a constellation of individual characters from their births to their inevitable deaths. In the epic, history takes place, but it is heroism that moves individuals (and, by extension, tribes) to act. Most importantly, the epic can never be separated from the context of its performance (or its transcription or redaction in the case of written versions), for as shown above, it possesses a certain amount of fluidity while at the same time maintaining a core narrative remarkably unchanged over time. It is precisely the epic's ability, in performance by a master poet, to change, absorb, and react to current situations while continuing to relate a tradition that its audiences know and appreciate, that has allowed it to survive through the centuries as a living, vibrant tradition.

Notes

- 1 All dates cited hereafter are CE. For information on the development of the Arabic historical tradition, see Dūrī 1983; El-Hibri 1999.
- 2 For a cross-cultural survey see Harris and Reichl 1997.
- 3 The best studies of these early narratives are Caskel 1930 and Meyer 1970.
- 4 For a discussion of the development of *ṣīra* and related genres of historical and biographical narrative, see Reynolds 2001: 38–43.
- 5 For a detailed analysis of this technique, see Hodgson 1974: I, 352–7.
- 6 Widely available in a French translation titled *Histoire des Berbères* by Baron William MacGuckin de Slane (d. 1878) which was first published in 1847–51 in Algeria by the French Ministry of War as part of their campaign to publish texts critical to consolidating their hold on Algeria which they had invaded in 1830 (Ibn Khaldūn 1847–51).
- 7 The information summarized here is presented in much greater detail in Reynolds 1995.
- 8 Sample verses from these twin performances are analyzed in “Bani Hilal” in Allen and Richards 2006: 307–19.

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Comments on “Epic and History”

DEAN MILLER

Perhaps the first cliché to be demolished in the papers presented at the “Epic and History” conference was the crude definition “epic = fiction, history = fact.” In my comments, I will trace the demolition of that notion, taking the papers (mostly) sequentially and in the major groupings in which they were presented, and following that, adding my own perspective on the data and the analytic perspectives laid out here. In fact a commentary such as this has at least two different goals. The first is to sensibly condense the content of the papers (now chapters), risking, of course, distortion or over-simplification, and to append comments and, one hopes, clarifying remarks. The second, and probably the more important goal is to tempt the reader to go on, to read on, to become complicit in investigating a fascinating area of human creativity over the millennia.

West and South Asia

Piotr Michalowski begins with an agnostic cavil: “Maybe Epic: The Origins and Reception of Sumerian Heroic Poetry.” Michalowski is not quite satisfied with the generic terms “epic” and “history” themselves, as they fit (or do not fit) the Sumerian reality, and he would like these genres to be reformulated, so as to be less classificatory and more identificatory – as marking a particular worldview. That said, he sees a special feature in the “texts” that provided us with ancient Sumer’s literary creations, where memorized texts were subsequently “performed” by writing them down: the physical act retained, reinforced memory. In the mix of texts describing the acts and adventures of Uruk’s kings, particularly in the zone of “life and death” to the highland east, hostile yet providing necessary raw material, even treasure (and the “hero-king” Gilgamesh comes in here, in one of many narratives), Michalowski sees little likelihood

of true historicity, but a considerable likelihood of recoverable conventions and combinations that applied the past to the present (at that time) – and which, eventually, were adapted to support a new type of kingship in Ur (a divine kingship?). In fact a datum of history (the so-called “matter of Aratta”) was abandoned or reshaped; here epic became re-invented history.

Joan Goodnick Westenholz takes us to Akkad and its own interpenetration of history and heroic narrative, and she introduces figures who will become very familiar: Sargon of Akkad and the Sargonids – historical figures who would be identified thereafter as “hero-kings.” We say “historical” but in fact what we could call “historical” records are sparse on the ground here. What we do have may profess or claim to contain a core of historical fact – in the form of “sagas,” extensively re-composed, that seemingly are fascinated with the conquest theme, and with the spatial *topos* of “the expedition into the unknown” (to some degree parallel to the Sumerian “matter of Aratta”). Westenholz sees multiple reflections and creations (the sources we know can be discovered from as far afield as Egypt) and, also, multiple uses of the texts, education and entertainment among them – and of course the texts still furnish plenty of employment for contesting scholars. One of these scholars sees, in legends, “the lessons of history” but there also may have been a cultic use, in which case history (acts of the actual saga heroes) may have been translated into legend, as a centering focus for a cult. A complicated scene indeed!

Amir Gilan, in “Epic and History in Hittite Anatolia: In Search of a Local Hero,” then pitches us several sly curves. First, he warns against “anachronistic expectations” before instructing us that no genuine “Hittite hero” was in fact available – that Hittite kings had Sargon of Akkad firmly implanted in their heads, and so it seems that *imported* heroes were the important thing here, and continued to be so. Even after the addition of Hurrian influences from northern Syria (with some historical references in the king-lists) and the added epical “adventure” tale involved in the taking of Ebla and the freeing of captives, what we identify as “epic” descriptions remain rare, while even *comic* descriptions – of failed sieges, for example – appear in the record. So much, one might say, for “national epics.”

Continuing in Anatolia, Mary Bachvarova, in her analysis (“Manly Deeds: Hittite Admonitory History and Eastern Mediterranean Didactic Epic”), re-sets the Hittite situation in an eastern Mediterranean frame, one that could, possibly, include the magisterial *Iliad*. A collection or congeries of elements make up the “manly deeds” theme for the Hittites (the release of prisoners in Ebla, for example, and the city’s destruction) – and these include history, parable, “folk” elements, and monitory tales, and Bachvarova sees “a common pool of conceptions” (especially set in parable form and often constructed by using animal images) that stretches to the Mycenaean area and even, perhaps, on to Hesiod. Her frame, then, is surely inclusive not exclusive, and extends widely to take in modes and genres as well as topical areas of “tale.”

Susan Niditch leads us into what might not seem to be an obvious epical context, the Book of Judges in the Hebrew Bible. Yet here we find epic/heroic combats, a “conquest” theme, and almost certainly the inclusion of extempore oral compositions. As for “history,” Niditch sees several narratives, one of them “triumphalist” (we might

say, the voice of the propagandist) and at least three other voices as well: one bardic (showing a parallel here to the classical epic), one theological or theologian (unique to this biblical context?), and one humanist, meaning, in this context, the voice dedicated to preserving an important past – and “old stories.” This of course is a term taken from our own Renaissance, as imprinted in our Western “history.” Niditch sees in her text a *mixture* of these voices, a mixture of worldviews. And, finally, biblical history may not emerge identified as a collection of verified or indisputable facts, but as providing “markers” forming a notion of Israelitic “heroic” identity at a time notably, though often vaguely, envisioned as occurring “before the kings.”

Finally, shifting to South Asia, James Fitzgerald bravely turns to the epic that “contains everything,” the *Mahābhārata*, and he finds that among the “everything” contained is an eschatological/theological tale, with an obvious oral-epic background of heroic “exploit” narratives. In fact this epic is a “multi-media narrative tradition,” and not just a text. Fitzgerald agrees with Michael Witzel on the premise that some sort of battle once occurred “in time” (one involving the Kurus’ tribal kingdom) but, more importantly, *another* historical development stood behind the elevation and the authenticating of the epic: events of the fourth to third centuries BCE, when the imperial Maurya dynasty, leaning perilously toward Buddhism and thus anti-brahmin, threatened the status of the self-identified highest Indic caste. A pro-brahmin counter-offensive eventually eliminated this threat, and in the end the ethics of kingship will be laid out in the *Mahābhārata*, setting in place the essentials of the “true” Brahminical guidance of, or partnership with, kingship. The epic, then, is authenticated, and in turn authenticates, “righteous” rule – so the epic “intervenes in history.”

Greece and Rome

Here we begin where we might have expected to begin, with the Trojan War and so (in one tradition at least) the inescapable *Ur-epos*. Jonas Grethlein takes us “From ‘Imperishable Glory’ to History: The *Iliad* and the Trojan War,” beginning with an account of the long and bitter scholarly conflict (a second Trojan War?) waged over the epic’s historicity. In point of fact, archaeology at Hisarlik does not support (or authenticate) the *Iliad*; some memory of a Mycenaean event may have persisted for the four centuries that elapsed before the tale was written down, but we still cannot know (or agree on) what precise period the poem represents. So, is “conscious archaism” at work? So far as the *Iliad* exists *as* history, we have to note its aristocratic biases, but also an emphasis on *community* concerns, and a “negotiation of social issues.” Grethlein sees a subtle development as the Homeric heroes engage with their own history (he terms this a “plu-past,” which may be awkward but expresses an important point). Finally, he sees more historical “remnants” – contemporary, non-Mycenaean evidence – in the poem, and fewer “sources” for the distant past (these terms will reappear in other chapters by other authors) and he remarks on the true value of Homer for the “history of history.” This is a firmly stated, cool, lucid examination of a very large complex of “epical” problems.

Ewen Bowie, in “Historical Narrative in Archaic and Early Classical Greek Elegy,” focuses on early Greek elegy, and a handful of very fragmentary texts. Here he finds “attention to chronology” but perhaps also a center in history, and in one case an attempt to epicize a particular battle, in the Homeric fashion. Another example may show a movement from a “mythic” scene to a particular story – or, again, an epic form (with hexameters) is combined with the elegiac (which is used for historical detail). Bowie notes that some of the techniques used by the elegists are also used by Herodotus – though the “father of history” does not ever mention the elegists. The sense of “past” we get in these elegiac fragments is that distant pasts could be mythized, and would then help in turn to mythize the *immediate* past. Bowie even, and courageously, posits (or invents) some of the titles of elegiac examples (from poets whose names are known) that *might* have just preceded the work of the poets whose elegies, however fragmentary, we do have. Finally, he deals with Apollonius of Rhodes, a Hellenistic epic poet whose preferred audience, although he addressed a panhellenic public, remained the cultivated man, the symposiast – thus conflating the elegist’s and the epicist’s worlds. What Bowie accomplishes here is a demonstration of how to get a great deal from a small or fragmentary amount of evidence, without distorting or over-inflating the data he has in hand, or overstating the conclusions he reaches.

Sander Goldberg gives us “Fact, Fiction, and Form in Early Roman Epic” – again, an important excavation and examination in an area not that well or widely known. We are, however, on familiar ground when the “rival jurisdictions” of poetry and history are put on view, as they are here. In fact poetry and history were closely entangled in the Roman Republic, and when Rome observed the way Greek literature had been able to foster “civic ideology and national identity” it soon managed to devise its own historical epics, using a particular verse form, and eventually a new *Roman* genre was born. The Carthaginian crisis (and its triumphant resolution) produced both written history and written epic, and we can see a social or class division: the aristocracy claimed stern history for their own, while poetry was widely popular, but *both* genres claimed to “preserve tradition,” always a good thing in Roman eyes. Yet both history and epic came to fullest flower just when the Republic died – with Livy’s massive production *Ab Urbe Condita*, while Virgil trumped the historian with his *Aeneid*. Epicized fiction, we could say, won the day, and yet it must have been a genuine (historical) fact, to the flattered Roman audience, that Jupiter Optimus Maximus *had* indeed granted Rome “rule without end.”

Raymond Marks continues into the Empire with “The Song and the Sword: Silius’s *Punica* and the Crisis of Early Imperial Epic.” Here we can see what one might call the interruptive or interceptive aspect of history’s “real” (or “true”) events, as (in the early years of the Principate) Roman poets turned away from the historical epic and toward explorations of Greek myth – a much safer enterprise. Silius Italicus (first century CE) was the exception, but he and his *Punica* evidently ended the tradition – at least for several centuries, until Claudian revived it. His particular invention was the “poet-warrior,” that is, he joined the epic narrator with the epic actor (and the historical hero): in the *Punica* this hero was Scipio Africanus. Here

the old, much-celebrated communal excellences (stressing "moral value and civic function") faded before the stronger promise of a "savior," a powerful ruler. Silius also offers an implied backhand slap against the sweet singers, for in Rome *virtus* must surely win out over *voluptas* – while Apollo, depicted with both bow and lyre, represented a divine endorsement and an iconic type. We could say that myth flavored the last Roman historical epic, but was not allowed to substitute for it. But Silius Italicus (who admired his patron, the Flavian emperor Domitian, and praised him as a "poet-warrior" who celebrated himself in epic verses) could not recover the communal spirit of the republican epic mode, and the powerful individual, the ruler, was now set to control, directly or indirectly, *all* poetic and historical genres.

Medieval Epic

Olga Davidson introduces us to "The Burden of Mortality: Alexander and the Dead in Persian Epic and Beyond," where we must see, in the person of Alexander of Macedon, an extraordinary focal conjunction of historical data, "epical" deeds, and essentially mythic inventions. Much is known "historically" about the remarkable son of Phillip II, and much is unknown (the actual location of Pella, the capital of the kingdom of Macedon, was only certified very recently). Post-mortem, Alexander (the undoubtedly heroic star of his own epic *bios*) was folded into myth – or into "myths," for various versions of the so-called *Alexander Romance* have come down to us – and in the Persian version of his life and afterlife (as Davidson says) authors, such as Ferdausi in the *Shahnamah*, changed and not-so-subtly reduced the Great One's overarching posture and supernatural status: however impressive his career may have been, at the end he became a "pilgrim," a forlorn searcher attempting to escape death – and failing. His very conquests ("epically" inflated so that the irony would be clearer) are surely negated by the fact that he left no heir. One could say that the long-sought revenge of the conquered Achaemenids over their "historical" conqueror was completed, centuries later, by their Islamic successors, devising as they did a newly "mythized" and nearly pitiable character for Iskander. Ferdausi of course recorded other, Persian, heroes (and had to deal with a pre-Islamic Iran as well, as other epic poets had to deal with pagan societies and "pasts" elsewhere).

Susana Torres Prieto, in "Slavic Epic: Past Tales and Present Myths," mainly limits herself to East Slav epical evidence, where we have the emblematic, grand, and tragic "Tale of the Host of Igor" as well as more optimistic and triumphalist examples (the "Kulikovo" cycle, for example) and a fair amount of shorter "epicoid" poems, and themes and examples borrowed from the Greek (Byzantine) treasury: the *Alexander Romance* (seen again), and the *Digenes* epos (the latter we know to be a completely non-historical invention, despite the hard but vain work, some decades ago, of Henri Grégoire). She sees evidence, early on, of the use of the "Russian" epic as a sort of proto-national propaganda, stressing "religion and the Motherland" – and this long before nineteenth-century Russian nationalism (and the Pan-Slav movement) took hold. To the older written material we then find added the shorter "oral

epics” or *byliny*, in their two main collections, the “Kievan” and the “Novgorodan.” Here Torres Prieto takes the opportunity to contrast briefly East Slavic with South Slavic oral heroic traditions, seeing no common origins or *Ur*-themes of any importance that might connect them, along with certain variations in figural representation (as, for example, the various, historically identified prince-martyrs in the South Slav “Kosovan” cycle, like Prince Lazar, contrasted to the vaguely described, “typical” or mythical, probably non-historical “Prince Vladimir” of the Kievan tales). She also notes that the East Slav oral creations tended to be “set” with little room for bardic thematic improvisation; a “social function,” she posits, had already been demanded of these folk/oral songs; this is an important observation, but one that may need further thought.

With Geoffrey Russom we turn to one of the major epic examples we know, *Beowulf*, and another thorny cluster of problems, just a few of these collected here in his contribution on “Historicity and Anachronism in *Beowulf*.” Russom sees this “Germanic” epic (recorded in Anglo-Saxon, in a regional context absent from the epic itself) as “culturally archaic,” attached more to other Northern mythic narratives (like *Voluspá*) with their significant quotients of monstrous foes and cosmic conflicts, strong emphasis on the dire workings of fate, and special attention to heroism’s vital and defining acts – especially seeking condign vengeance. We already know that the terrain described in the poem is constructed (or poetic or dramatic), not a real (secular?) location, and that the one “historical” reference we can find in the poem – a minor skirmish in which the Geatish king, Hygelac, is fatally present – serves merely to (perhaps) date the poem. The vexed question of the element of Christianity visible in *Beowulf* (even the earliest date assigned for the poem is at least a century after this faith became dominant in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms) is less important, it seems, than a kind of Old Testament flavor: the “Lord” mentioned looks like an OT deity, and “heathen” are not excluded or vilified here. Russom is open and friendly to J. R. R. Tolkien’s old (1936) but certainly not outdated article (though Tolkien saw more Christianity in the epic than Russom will accept) and concludes that the poem was originally received and appreciated by a “hybrid” society – and certainly one deeply interested in heroic acts and values. Beyond this, however, *Beowulf*, the poem, is a complex mix and structure built of archaisms and purposeful anachronisms (not an identifiable source of “history”) – and yet it is an epic creation ever open (down to our own day) to new interpretations, new views, and new uses. It will attract and endure – anachronistic in detail or not, for its epic power lies far beyond anachronism. Or so we hope.

Albrecht Classen confronts and dissects another “canonical” Germanic epic, the *Nibelungenlied*, and he places this poem at a “crossroads” (or several of them – not least as these are identified as the “interfaces” between oral and written sources, historical and mythical treatments). This poem of the twelfth century CE is *not* a chronicle, and attempts to anchor the events it describes in “real” history have not been very successful; it remains a narrative on what Classen calls a “mytho-historical level,” meaning, in this case, that its lessons are experienced in *psychological* history, especially in the perception of self and other, the nature of transgression, and what

he calls the "emotional-historical" issues of the period – even while the poem provides "a profound reflection on past events." Classen provides a psychologically reflective and sensitive treatment of his epic subject (this certainly is a "modern" point of view, although the psychic data themselves of course are transhistorical) while seeing the importance of the specific traumas of the very troubled time of the poem's creation in the form we now have, with the horrifying and violent final scenes of the poem in which everyone loses, everything is lost. He even sees the *Nibelungenlied* as timeless: does this mean "ahistorical"? Or perhaps fitted to all times, the way heroic texts (in whatever form) are timeless, both for the fame and the glories they dramatically describe, and the fatal failures they record as well – when, reporting or reflecting grave lapses in human communication, they themselves communicate a vast, hard, age-old lesson about what is possible and what is impossible, even to heroes.

In "Medieval Epic and History in the Romance Literatures" Joseph Duggan lays out a straightforward account of what "historical" data can be found in or mined from the various sub-genres, beginning with the *chansons de geste*, which are concerned with (or describe) events ranging from the early Carolingian period to occurrences contemporary with and thus known to the performers and their audience. Count Roland himself, the hubristic hero, *may* be an historical figure, but may not, and this pattern of uncertainty continues in the *chansons*; fact and fiction are freely intermixed here. Another category, the "crusading" songs, show "a modest amount of eye-witness testimony," while the Spanish *Poema de mio Cid* betrays the same quasi-historical perspective or attitude: Rodrigo de Bevar is known to history, and the Muslim side – the supposed enemy – is treated realistically, not as an imaginary construct, as in the Roland poem. The *Poema*, it seems, also boosts the fame and the claims of one clan over another; so there is a little epic jiggery-pokery here. The authorial bias in the type of "Albigensian crusade" invention can vary, we see, according to the sympathies (anti- or pro-southern) of the jongleur. And we occasionally perceive evidence of this or that jongleur, the oral performer, "twisting" his song for some reason (to slight a stingy host, for example), or even claiming to have written out a part of his performance himself. Duggan's very sensible conclusion is that the farther the events are from the performance, the less likely probative, historical "fact" is going to be included – but he is also prepared to venture the opinion that the origins of the whole *chanson* genre in this part of the world were to be found in "Spoken Latin" (vernacular) poems sung by Roman soldiers of the Empire – a nicely crafted and ingenious, if arguable, "historical" connection.

Michel-André Bossy continues to look over the best-known of the *chansons de geste*, and in "Roland's Migration" lays out the three ways in which the *chanson* may be examined for historicity: as providing *sources*, actual and provable information about the past; as *remains* (dealing with, singing of contemporary events, such as the Albigensian Crusade), and as *aftereffects*, where orality is left behind and a "paper trail" (of parchment, actually) appears. Bossy concentrates his attention on the last-named, seeing the central drama of the old fight (and defeat) in northern Spain taken up by Capetian propagandists (among other aims they pursued, Charlemagne himself had to be assimilated to the royal lineage) – and the gradual ascendancy of

an historically “sensitive” prose or chronicle account (poetry being increasingly seen as mere entertainment and more fictional). The model for the royal *chronique* – and what could be more serious than this? – was the Christian Bible, and so “truth” had to be in the forefront, not allowed to give way to epical, poetic fantasy. Bossy notes the confusion (appearing in Roland’s *chanson* itself) between *geste* defined as “deed done” and *geste* as “lineage” (the latter usage is more frequent); reacting in our own time, we might find this variation in definition odd. Another ambiguity is visible in the treatment (or opinion) of writing itself, in the *chansons de geste*: writing may authenticate the truth of the song, or writing may be denigrated, as *less* truthful, as inherently suspect (a parallel is clear, here, to the Celtic druidic attitude to “lying” script). In the end, despite the many dramatic excellences of the many inventions of the jongleurs (fed on a rich and confused mixture of oral memories and, possibly, some texts) the French prose *chroniques* won out, in terms of attested “authority and purported credibility,” in the late medieval era. Of course, we in *our* time have revived the fame of the *geste*; so to some extent the jongleur’s song is still sung (or repeated), and is still appreciated, while the royal chronicles have declined into an existence in the limited sphere of the academic specialist.

Mercedes Vaquero on “Complaints and Laments by Noble Women” in the medieval Spanish epic turns our attention to women featured in the epic genre; we have seen few women of epic importance except for some goddesses, and the battle-maiden Brunhilde and the vengeful queen Kriemhilde in the *Nibelungenlied*. The “noble ladies” whose laments are recorded (in prose accounts) will cry out when their honor has been insulted and violated – if indirectly, as when one of their servants is killed while under their legal protection (and his blood contaminates them and, by extension, *their* nobility – that is, their “blood”). The themes and images displayed in these “laments” are consistent: hints of symbolic rape (and of real and symbolic death), a dramatic conjunction formed between Eros and Thanatos, where an untimely death also is seen to cut off the procreative future of a family. The “laments” resonate to such themes, found elsewhere, as tales of the deaths of virgin martyrs (we see this reflection especially in *El Cid*), and there might also be a tap-root down to the tradition of the female mourner, whose extremes of vocal distress were traditional and accepted. (This also poses an interesting performative problem: how did the male minstrel manage to “sing” these dramatic arias?) What we are meant to see here is one facet of the complex of sex and power in medieval Iberia, with a great inflation of the notion of personal honor (the famous Spanish *pundonor*) – a situation which the “noble ladies,” otherwise bereft of any personal power but *not* at all passive, could manipulate, thus frustrating any attempt to completely control their dangerous feminine sexuality.

Robert Fulk concludes the medieval section with his analysis of “History in Medieval Scandinavian Heroic Literature and the Northwest European Context.” This is a big subject indeed, as it includes the Norse saga materials and the Irish and Welsh sources that reflect their own attitudes to “history” (however defined). The Norse sagas, and most particularly the *fornaldar sögur* or “tales of old times,” were used anciently to authenticate heroic deeds – for a recognizable distance in time was, in

the North, equated with probative truth. While *we* would call the "family sagas" more historically plausible and valuable as sources, though (like most medieval texts) they included their quotient of the supernatural, Fulk makes the important point that to the Norse of that day the heroic superhuman was more wonderful than the vulgar supernatural. The "founders" of Iceland (the settlement which was included and concluded in history) were mythologized, especially as we see in the saga of another "powerful woman," Unur or Aud the Deep-Minded, and here an essentially accepting attitude to the undeniably pagan past – centuries in the past – prevailed. Therefore Snorri's *Edda*, with its pagan gods and cosmic themes, was important because it helped to explain the intricately coded language of skaldic "kenning." The Irish situation is also notable: the Tuatha Dé of the "mythological cycle" and later were not viewed as pagan, but simply a supernatural entity. (We should remember that "Patrick decreed heaven for Cú Chulainn," the emblematic – and certainly non-Christian – head-taker and nonpareil Irish hero.) Traces of the old religion certainly remained in the Irish narratives (with gods and goddesses, including bull-gods) and some rather more thoroughly disguised old gods can also be found in the medieval Welsh sources. In Wales, as well, Fulk sees the necessity for the development and maintenance of a type of heroic poetry to protect a "national" (cultural) identity in the face of English aggression. (Ireland of course also suffered from an expansive and intermittently dangerous Viking presence.) The Scandinavian situation remains "unusual," not least because of the importance (as late as the thirteenth century) of imported Icelandic court poets, who connected the Norse present with the past – the "founding" times? – by means of their control of an arcane "kenning" vocabulary; anyone who has dealt with the sagas knows the striking contrast between the staid and solid, almost phlegmatic tone of saga prose, and the marvelous but frustrating bursts of coded skaldic verse. On the question of "epic and history" Fulk is matter-of-fact: the surviving texts are often "counterfactual," but still they contain a past, and their traces of "reliable traditional lore" have an obvious value – both to the medieval contrivers and to us.

Recent and Contemporary Oral/Epic Traditions

This final section gives us four chapters, beginning with John Miles Foley on "Traditional History in South Slavic Epic." Foley asks for a major readjustment in our thinking about historicity in the oral epics, namely, that "traditional history" (as created/repeated by the performer-singer or, here, the Bosnian *guslar*) *is* true – for the singer and, presumably, for his listeners. Before expanding on this notion, Foley describes the morphology of the South Slav epics, in their Christian and their Muslim sub-genres; the former are shorter, and feature (historically) identifiable characters (in the tragic Kosovo epos, for example), while the latter (though, we assume, set in the glory-time of Suleiman the Magnificent) have a more diverse epic-mythic cast of characters. In any event, according to Foley these epics contain a "visible, internally consistent view of the past," with the Muslim epic songs spinning

out recognizable sequences (with much possible variability in detail), and plastic-poetic treatments rather than (as with normative historical, “Western” prose narrative) “textual certitude” or reflections of an immutable “ideology of text.” All the epic songs, produced from whatever faith, “imply,” says Foley, “more than they denote” and convey “spirit,” not reality. Continuing his argument, he sees “traditional history” as a valid “collective chronicle” or group biography; and, for the audience or group – depending on the skill of the singer to evoke and re-evoke “old times” – these “old times” are *true*. With a side-glance at the component of perspective (or ideology or bias) invariably contained in orthodox (normative scholarly) historiography, Foley insists, or at least suggests, that for the community to which the epical song is addressed, “traditional history” is a reality: it is “the truth.” This is a bold position, and could be considered either as relativism gone out of control or as a strong argument for inserting variability and nuance into the “reading” of the epics’ historicity. Let me reserve my own opinion.

Dennis Tedlock (“Lord Five Thunder”) recounts the encounter (or co-existence) of a Guatematecan K’iche’ Mayan “dance drama” with an introduced Spanish *Moros y Cristianos* playlet, or piece of (in fact essentially medieval) “vernacular theater” translated into the local Mayan language. The encounter and the contrast are instructive, though both dramas do refer to something we can call an authentic historical datum, however fragmented and reworked: a rebellion in the K’iche’ lands and the condign, ritualized punishment of its instigator in the Mayan prose-play, the fateful expedition of “Carlo Magno” and his 12 paladins in the Spanish import. The two dramas, *Man of Rabinal* and *Carlo Magno*, share, in their dramatic structure, certain refractions of character (especially the “hero and antagonist”) and some central themes (confrontations and reversals and so on). The number 12 as a central control-figure is ingeniously recalculated in the Mayan case (where 13, we are told, has a more potent cosmic value) by figuring the decapitated hero as a “thirteenth” important part, while a character in the *Moros y Cristianos* drama, Balán, is neatly associated with Mayan *balam*, “jaguar.” It is important to note that the Rabinal epicoid play is “directed” by way of a written script, the direct and authentic descendent of many other scripts, though variations still occur (as memories might lapse during a performance, and so on). Tedlock concludes that – and here I share his favorable opinion of the slyly but solidly resistant character of the so-called “conquered” Maya in general – that *Man of Rabinal* was a Mayan play “retold so as to counterpoint or even contradict the Spanish [tale].” Thus a highland Mayan community rooted itself firmly, nearly defiantly, in its own imaginal past, even retaining some vestiges of a pre-European, pre-Christian belief system.

Richard Whitaker’s examination of “History, Myth, and Social Function in Southern African Nguni Praise Poetry” takes us to an area where “epic” performances (in any European sense) are not known at all, but praise poems (*izibongo*) are not only known but are still “sung.” “Singing” in fact still is a living medium practiced here, while a telling example of what the “praise poem” is *not* is given by Whitaker in his citation of an edited and printed version of a praise poem about Shaka Zulu, the great nineteenth-century chieftain, for this (academic) version actually condenses

and conflates some 33 oral versions (performances) to make up a "biography" of Shaka. The *izibongo* are not true narratives, as we would recognize a narrative, but are made up of allusive, symbolically charged, descriptive words and phrases, especially involving sharply inscribed or subtly nuanced animal metaphors. In each performance (and these are *not* texts but performances) a Western ear or perceptive/receptive apparatus would not find "history" at all, because there is no described or perceptible linearity, no attempt to overtly join and link "facts," to point out cause and effect. The singer, the audience, the circumstances of the performance all combine, and what Whitaker tells us at last is that *this* sort of "history" must be understood as a created dramatic amalgam of "drama, evaluation, and judgment." He adds that at a particular point in time the acts and character of the great Shaka himself were revived in new praise songs, songs crafted to reinforce new patterns of emergent political reality in southern Africa. Ending his discussion, Whitaker appends a dramatically contrasting "description" (in accepted Western usage) of an event, then shows the event itself – in which a praise song was actually performed, where the singer's evocation of animal images and acts evoked, surrounded, penetrated, subtly mocked, and, in short, made real a "target," a politically powerful Boer educator. I truly regret that I, like the reader, was not able to actually see the video reproduction of this "praise song" performance.

Finally, Dwight Reynolds ("Epic and History in the Arabic Tradition") brings us around again to the matter of prose and (or, versus) poetry. From pre-Islamic times, he notes, poetry was paramount to the Arabs – the poetic, in fact, denoted the undeniably authentic. Islam's success then added certain characteristics, especially in poems celebrating "exemplary lives" and the supersession by written of some oral forms. The main focus of this discussion, however, is on the "epic" performances celebrating, in a centuries-long sequence of oral performance, the heroic adventures of a Bedouin tribal confederation called the Banī Hilāl, who – in history, in the first century AH – conquered a large part of North Africa before being themselves defeated, scattered, and nearly annihilated. The theorist of history (he deserves the term) most concerned with the tribe (though hostile to it) was the great Ibn Khaldūn, who seems to have collected oral accounts, legends (and poems) to help him construct his commentary, though he often questioned their veracity. What is fascinating here is that the Banī Hilāl (condemned to disaster and obloquy in history) became the center and focus of a long, living tradition of oral epic, and that this epic was still performed within living memory, by singers in Egypt, in the style we know from Muslim Bosnia (that is, the epic was sung/spoken to a solo instrumental accompaniment, and very long performances were not uncommon). What these performances stressed was what we would expect in epic: an intensely "personalized" focus, a powerfully emotional and affective tone, the creation of heroic individual characters and the favoring of one character over another, and (always) the centering of the heroic action in the heroic past. Reynolds makes the point that the mere repetition of a received oral account was regarded as inferior to the "master poet's" command of variation, decoration and tone in his epic performance. What history was actually contained in these performances? The onslaught of the Banī Hilāl was real,

while some ascertainable facts are avoided (the original conflict involved Arab nomads against established Berber powers) and certain additions are un-historical (the “Franks” and the Crusades are anachronistically inserted into the narrative). It seems likely that the epic has been tailored to what Reynolds calls “the context of oral folk history” in Egypt; a collective memory did not need or require the retention of various “historical” elements, but did require that other elements be present. The skills of the singers manifest themselves in their evocation of sharp and deep emotions, grand deeds, the individual-in-history, something more splendid, more honorable, perhaps even more *real*, than anything in the ordinary life of an Egyptian *fellah*. Unfortunately, it appears that, today, no one is singing these epics any more; television has triumphed.

In Conclusion

If we go to Liddell and Scott’s *Greek–English Lexicon* we find that *epos* originally meant, simply, “word” or something spoken, later adding the meaning of “poem” and even later denoting the kind of poem we usually mean when we say (or write) “epic” (a word which itself only entered the English language in the late sixteenth century). When I tried, myself, to describe *The Epic Hero*, I saw him as a human character, usually but not always a fictional (poetic) creation (though this can be tricky: Linear B inscriptions have given us a Mycenaean “Achilles”) who can be drawn into one *Gestalt*, a generic *bios*, by means of a series of appearances, themes, adventures, partners, weapons, and so on. I was not much directly concerned with him “in history,” though I noted that particular historical periods can and do generate, celebrate, meditate on, and appreciate his powers, his excellences, his life, his fate. The morphology, the typology, even the symptomatology (and pathology) of this figure are what I was trying to outline. The scholars whose work is collected here have quite different aims – which, in fact, they have, in my opinion, fulfilled nobly.

The essays printed above illustrate how complicated the search for definition can be; various authors offer various uses and forms of the epic, essentially the hero-tale, in an assigned sequence that itself betrays our own “sense” of or schema fitted to history’s course, from ancient Middle Eastern and other very early examples, through the classical world, on to the medieval specimens (“earlier” and “later”), and finally extending the span to “singers of tales” who performed their epic or epicoid wonders within living memory. Many of the epics we find examined here are canonical, that is, accepted as salient creations within the Western cultural structure (a structure here expanded by some extensions and additions) and, perhaps predictably, it is the canonical epics that are most often made the subject of attempts to “historicize” them – to extract “true” data from the “fictive” heart of the songs: this process certainly began with the *Iliad*, where archaeology was deployed, among other goals, to confirm the “fact” of an Achaean assault on an Asian city. The problem with archaeology, however, is that discovery or recovery, however laborious, is only a part

of the task; interpretation of what is uncovered is the tough, often debated, troublesome and intellectually demanding part.

We see any number of variations on the theme of the epic *in* history, the epic *as* history, and history-in-epic. One may fade or blend or be transmuted into the other – for in all cases we see the past being subjected to both reason or intellect and imagination, the central point being that it is *past*, and for any particular culture or social group the past is vitally important – even when it is denigrated (called barbarous or Gothick – or *passé*) you can be sure that the tide will turn, and the past, or a past, will return with it. In the end, the image that comes to my mind when examining this whole complex of studies of “epic and history” is a combination of mosaic and palimpsest, of patterns discrete yet suggesting a whole, of layers of meaning and significance, some obscured or covert, others clear and overt. There is confusion here – it is possible there always will be.

Clearly both poetic construction (epic) and an organization of past events (history) are used to anchor and authenticate social groups and cultures. Then epic often reveals a “doubled” historical perspective: the “creators” of the epic consolidate their own past; we then observe this creation, and make certain assumptions about the creators *in their time*. Epical narratives also can reveal, directly or by inference, forms of social history, by showing who (the poet? the priest? the aristocrat? the king?) controls, or tries to control, the genre, and how successful such attempts may be. The *political* dimension of this control is suggested in several of the essays included here; we know of Nazi propaganda aimed at calling up visions of Germanic myth and epic, or of a Serb nationalism gone septic, crying manipulated tears over Kosovo Polje; to this we could add varying Soviet views of epic and epic narrative: from encouraging “folk” or popular forms (separating them from any elite or aristocratic origin) to later censoring, under Stalin, scholarship on and performance of the great Central Asian epics (the Kirghiz *Manas*, the Kalmuck *Joloi*, for example), on the grounds that they fostered “bourgeois nationalism” and were anti-Soviet. But attempts to circumscribe, manipulate, and control both epic and history themselves have a long history; I am thinking of ancient king-lists, “conquest” narratives, and invented ancestor myths, of Augustus’s “new order” that was to be authenticated both by Virgil and Livy, or of the medieval French monarchy’s absorption of the Roland epos.

Yet in fact epic *is* part of our intellectual history, or the history of the creative human mind – this is its final excellence, its fitting place.

But we can ask the question: whither epic, especially epic poetry? (History, however defined, can take care of itself – “the end of history” as a valid notion lasted for about a cycle of the moon.) Has the novel (or for that matter the film, or some other medium) displaced it completely? Or is the historical novel (itself appearing, according to Georg Lucács’s Marxist analysis, at a particular historical moment and for specified reasons) the new epic form? (Of course, the book *qua* book is supposedly doomed to extinction too.) Could there be a *Song of Sarajevo*, for example – or a *Lament of Srebrenića* (or of Darfur)? In the end, to some extent it does not matter if the epic (as an invented genre) is dead or moribund: we have what we have, as the studies included here show very well, and no one can take this treasure from us.

Can history be reconfigured, as John Miles Foley suggests, to take in a “traditional” component, an alternative reality? I am not sure: civil war *could* break out over this suggestion, between theorists of history and historiography and students of literature, especially oral literature. For myself, I am sorely tempted to align Foley’s daring notion with the dictum of the authors of *1066 and All That*: history is not what actually happened, but what you can remember. Foley, however, is the inheritor of the mantle of Parry and Lord, whose work truly transformed our ideas of what epic was and how it was created and transmitted, and “one must respect the cannon of the Grand Turk.”

My conclusion thus remains constricted, as an “In-Conclusion,” but let me return to the Balkans for a final remark. At a recent colloquium, convened in Dubrovnik, in Dalmatic Croatia, I was told about a remark allegedly made by the Serb general whose artillery was busy shelling the city during the civil war of 1994–5. Replying to an objection from someone who reminded this officer of Dubrovnik’s status as a UNESCO-designated “world heritage site,” his response was: “It does not matter if I destroy this city. We Serbs will build another, more beautiful – *and older*.” The statement (and I cannot say that I was able to confirm it) may strike one as absurd, nearly surreal, but the view of history contained in it is worth reflecting on: to possess or proclaim something older, is better. And imagination is a wonderful thing.

Index

- Abū Su‘dā Khalifa, 399, 407
Abū Zayd, 405, 407
Acallam na Senórach, 336; *see also* *Fenian Cycle*
Achi Mun, 365, 369, 371
Achilles, 2, 5, 12, 66, 77, 78, 123, 133, 152, 155, 193, 194, 246, 267, 405, 422
Aemilius Lepidus, Marcus: *see* Lepidus
Aeneid (Vergil), 4, 170, 178, 185–6, 190–1, 318, 328, 414, 423; *see also* Roman epic tradition
Ættartala ok konunga evi, 333; *see also* Scandinavian history
African epic, 1, 5, 381–91; *see also* Nguni praise poetry; praise poetry; Shaka praise poetry
Agamemnon, 2, 5, 123, 129, 131, 193, 194, 350
Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sogum, 333; *see also* Scandinavian epic; Scandinavian history
Ajaw Job Toj, 365–72, 374, 375–8, 420
Akka, 17, 18, 19
Akkad(e), 8, 20, 29, 33, 34, 43, 57, 61, 67, 412
Akkadian epic, 5, 18–19, 26–50, 58, 60, 67, 71, 74, 79, 392, 412; *see also* Mesopotamian epic
Albright, W. F., 94
Alcuin, 254–5, 258
Alda, Doña, 310–15, 323–5; *see also* Spanish epic; women in epic
Aleppo, 53, 55, 60, 68, 69, 70, 71
Alexander the Great, 108, 123, 212–22, 414
Alexander Romance, 212–13, 218–19, 225–6, 234, 414
Alexandria, 8, 160, 185, 213, 219, 374; *see also* libraries and archives
Alfonso VI, King of Castile, 286, 296, 310–13, 317
Alija, D., 350
allegories: *see* symbolism, allegories, and iconography
Almohads, 397, 399, 400, 403, 406, 408
Alt, A., 94
Alvar Sánchez, 311
Amos, D. B., 86
anachronism, 32, 51, 129, 195–6, 199, 243–61, 356, 362, 364, 378, 416, 420
Anatolia, 34, 36, 38–9, 51, 53–6, 60, 66–9, 76, 412; Middle Hittite period, 29, 37, 52, 57–9, 68, 71, 73; Old Hittite period, 35, 38, 40–1, 53, 56, 59–60, 66, 68–71, 73; *see also* Hittite epic; Hittite history

- ancestor literature, 43, 52, 55, 60, 116,
 132, 146, 197, 243, 254, 256, 285–6,
 288, 294, 298, 301–2, 306, 330, 333,
 338, 340–1, 363, 365, 378, 386, 413,
 423
 Andronicus, Livius: *see* Livius Andronicus
 animal fables, symbolism, and metaphor,
 67–78, 227, 230, 254, 312, 314, 336–7,
 367, 372, 382, 384, 388, 389, 412, 421;
 see also symbolism, allegories, and
 iconography
Annals of Hattuşili I, 39, 52–5, 59, 68–70,
 75–9; *see also* Hittite epic; Hittite history
 anthropology, 91, 122, 126, 131, 262, 263,
 334, 393
 antiquarianism, 159, 173, 178, 244, 251,
 336–9
 Apollo, 189–92, 415; *see also* gods in epic
 Arabic epic, 5, 332–56, 392–410, 419–22
 Arabic history, 281, 396–401, 406, 421–2;
 see also historiography, Islamic
 Aratta, 14–18, 21, 412
 Archaic Age, 76, 79, 122, 125–34,
 145–66, 174, 244, 250, 256, 258, 266,
 268, 270, 273, 305, 339, 382, 414
Archaiologia of the Samians (Semonides of
 Amorgos), 145; *see also* elegy vs. epic,
 genre
 archaism, 3, 128–9, 255, 329, 413, 416
 Archilochus, 145, 150–2, 155–8;
 Deianeira, 145, 150–2, 155–8;
 Telephus, 150–2, 155–8
 archives: *see* libraries and archives
 Ardeshir, king of Sasanian dynasty,
 217–18
Argonautica (Apollonius of Rhodes), 145,
 149, 150, 158, 160–1, 414
 Ari Porgilsson, 331–3
 aristocratic literature, 232, 233, 297, 298,
 316, 319; *see also* cultural context; epic,
 function of, political; propaganda
 Aristotle, 8, 145, 146, 217, 218
 Arthurian tradition, 12, 44, 305, 328, 339,
 397
 Aryans, 103–6
 Assyria, 34–6, 38–40, 55, 57, 66, 97;
 see also Mesopotamia
 Attila, King of the Huns, 265–7, 271
 Aud the Deep-Minded, 305, 419; *see also*
 women in epic
 Auerbach, E., 257
 Augustan Age, 177–8, 186, 190–1, 423
 Babylonia, 10, 17–20, 32, 35, 38, 40–2,
 53, 55, 61, 66, 77, 374, 392; *see also*
 Mesopotamia
 Balam, 365, 369, 371, 375, 420
 Balán, 375–8, 420
 Banī Hilāl, 396–408, 421–2; *see also*
 Arabic epic; Arabic history
 bardic culture, 3–4, 30, 37, 43, 51, 52, 55,
 56, 57, 71, 75, 67, 70, 76, 88, 96, 92,
 89–92, 103–5, 107–9, 115, 123,
 127–8, 130, 132, 147, 151, 152, 155,
 157, 159, 177, 190–5, 198, 219, 224,
 230, 232, 235, 246, 252, 272, 280, 285,
 287, 293, 298–306, 310–19, 347–58,
 362, 364, 397, 403–5, 413, 416–22;
 see also performance context
 Basques, 281, 295
 Battle of Kosovo, 351, 354; *see also* South
 Slavic history
 Battle of Kulikovo, 227–8; *see also* Slavic
 epic; Slavic history; *Zadonshchina*
Battle of Maldon, 258; *see also* Germanic epic
 Battle of River Kalka, 228; *see also* South
 Slavic history
 Bédier, J., 294–5
Beowulf, 243–61, 265, 271, 328, 334, 397,
 416; *see also* Germanic epic
 Beresford, A., 316
 Berthe, 283–4
 Beyhaqi, 213, 218, 220; *see also* Persian
 epic; Persian history
Bhārata, 103–21; *Great Bhārata*, 104,
 107–10, 112–17; *Mahābhārata*,
 103–21, 413; *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata*,
 109–17
 Bharata(s), 106–21; *see also* South Asian
 epic
 Bible, 86–102, 229, 244, 251, 256–7, 300,
 336, 350, 364, 418; *see also* New
 Testament; Old Testament
 biblical history, 86, 99, 244, 336, 364, 413;
 see also historiography, biblical
 biography: *see* genre, biography

- bogatyri*, 229–30; *see also* oral tradition;
Slavic epic
- Book of Admonitions*: *see* *Kitāb al-ʿIbar*
- Book of Icelanders*: *see* *Íslendingabók*; *see also*
Scandinavian epic; Scandinavian history
- Book of Invasions*: *see* *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*;
see also Scandinavian epic; Scandinavian
history
- Book of Judges*, 86–102, 412, 413; *see also*
Bible; Hebrew epic; Old Testament
- Book of Settlements*: *see* *Landnámabók*;
see also Scandinavian epic; Scandinavian
history
- Bowra, C. M., 104
- brahmins, 105, 107–13, 116–17, 413
- Branwen Daughter of Llyr*, 338; *see also*
Mabinogi; Scandinavian epic; women in
epic
- Brettler, M., 95
- Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 106; *see also*
South Asian epic; Vedic tradition
- Bright, J., 94
- Bronze Age, 3, 59, 66, 76, 94–5, 124, 127
- Brunhild, 249, 268–72, 418; *see also*
Germanic epic; women in epic
- Brynhild: *see* Brunhild
- Bücheler, F., 171–2
- Buddhism, 108–9, 113–14, 413; *see also*
religious context
- Buile Suibne*, 336; *see also* Irish epic;
Scandinavian epic
- Burgundians, 264–72, 287
- byliny*, 229, 230–4, 416: *see also*
oral tradition; Slavic epic
- Caesar, 178, 288–90, 337, 338
- Callimachus, 150, 160, 185, 190–1
- Canso d’Antiocha*: *see* *Chanson d’Antioche*
- Canso de la Crozada*, 286–8, 293; *see also*
chansons de geste; Spanish epic
- Cantar de gesta*: *see* *chansons de geste*
- Cantar de mio Cid*, 280, 285, 290, 310,
316–17, 417–18; *see also* *chansons de*
geste; *Cidian Cycle*
- Carlo Magno, 364, 373–7, 420; *see also*
drama, Mayan; Spanish epic
- Carolingian period, 280–4, 296, 417;
see also Charlemagne
- Cary, G., 213
- Casali, S., 190–1
- Cato the Elder, 176–8; *Origines*, 176–8
- Cattle-Raid of Cooley*: *see* Irish epic;
Scandinavian epic; *Táin Bó Cúailnge*
- Cedar Forest, 18, 21, 27–8, 34
- Cet mac Mágach of Connacht, 337; *see also*
Scandinavian epic
- Chanson d’Antioche*, 284–5, 293; *see also*
chansons de geste; French epic
- Chanson de Guillaume*, 281–2, 290, 298,
303, 305; *see also* *chansons de geste*;
French epic
- Chanson de Jérusalem*, 285–6, 293; *see also*
chansons de geste; French epic
- Chanson de Roland*, 228, 265, 271, 280–1,
288–90, 294, 296–300, 305, 310–15,
364, 397, 417–18, 423; *see also* *chansons*
de geste; historicity, of Roland tradition
- chansons de geste*: 267, 280–92, 293–309,
318–19, 362, 417–18; *see also* *Chanson*
d’Antioche; *Chanson de Guillaume*;
Chanson de Jérusalem; *Chanson de*
Roland; *Crusade Cycle*
- Charlemagne, 254, 281–4, 287, 293–302,
305–6, 364, 417; *see also* Carlo Magno;
Carolingian period
- Charles the Bald, 284, 295
- Charles Martel, 283–4
- Christian epic, 5, 350–1, 354–6, 419–20;
see also Bible
- Christianity, 227–9, 231, 233–5, 243–5,
249–50, 253–7, 265, 271, 281–4, 287,
295–6, 300, 302, 315, 317, 319, 330–3,
336–7, 340, 349–54, 363–9, 373–8,
387, 400, 416, 419–20; *see also* religious
context
- Cicero, 167–9, 173–8, 186, 197–9;
De Legibus, 167–8, 177–8; *Marius*,
167–8, 177–8; *De Oratore*, 168–9;
De Republica, 197
- Cidian Cycle*, 271, 280, 310–12, 315–17,
417; *see also* *chansons de geste*; Spanish epic
- civil war, 88–9, 99, 112, 287, 406
- Colloquy of the Old Men*: *see* *Acallam na*
Senórach; *see also* *Fenian Cycle*; Irish epic;
Scandinavian epic
- Coloch, J. L., 369–71

- compositional context, 1–9, 10, 12–13, 15, 19–20, 29–42, 57–60, 68–9, 71, 73, 78, 79, 91–7, 105–14, 122–3, 125–9, 132, 134, 145, 147–50, 153–5, 157–60, 186–91, 194–7, 212, 227–9, 232–6, 250–2, 263–4, 284, 293–7, 310, 331–5, 341, 351–6, 386–7, 393, 413–14, 417, 423
- Conall Cernach of Ulster, 337; *see also* Irish epic; Scandinavian epic; *Ulster Cycle*
- Conchobar, king of Ulster, 336; *see also* Irish epic; Scandinavian epic; *Ulster Cycle*
- Connacht, 337; *see also* Irish epic; Scandinavian epic; *Ulster Cycle*
- conquest and cultural superiority: *see* themes of epic
- Coote, R., 95
- Cope, T., 383–6
- Council Book*, *see Popol Wuj*; *see also* drama, Mayan; Mayan epic
- cross-cultural context, influence, and parallels, 1–10, 20, 38–40, 51, 53–61, 66–71, 74–9, 87, 96–9, 127, 169–70, 174–7, 185–9, 192–3, 212–14, 218–20, 224–6, 229, 245–52, 255–7, 272, 281, 297–8, 306, 311–13, 317–19, 328–30, 336–8, 348, 350, 363–9, 373–8, 382, 396, 412–15
- Crusade Cycle*, 284–7, 293, 417; *see also* *chansons de geste*; French epic
- Crusades: 281, 284–7, 293, 296, 407, 417, 422; *see also* *Crusade Cycle*
- Cú Chulainn, 335, 336, 419; *see also* Irish epic; Scandinavian epic
- cultural context, 3–5, 20, 40–3, 51, 58, 73, 86, 89–91, 93, 96, 99–100, 104–5, 108, 112–14, 123, 129–34, 158–9, 169–78, 185–9, 193, 197–9, 224, 232–4, 244–6, 252, 257, 262–6, 270, 283, 296–8, 306, 310, 317–19, 335–7, 341, 347–51, 356, 373, 386, 405–8; *see also* epic, function of, civic; epic, function of, group identity
- Curse over Akkad(e)*, 29, 31, 33, 36, 41–2; *see also* Akkadian epic; Mesopotamian epic
- Cycle of Garin de Monglane*: *see Cycle of Guillaume*
- Cycle of Guillaume*, 282–3; *see also* *chansons de geste*; French epic; French history
- Cycle of the Cid*: *see Cidian Cycle*
- Dance of Trumpet*: *see Rabinal Achi*; *see also* drama, Mayan; Mayan epic
- dating problems, 35, 37–8, 41–2, 93–6, 107–10, 114–15, 122, 126, 128, 148, 227, 235, 250–3, 339–40, 387
- David, 87–9; *see also* Bible; Hebrew epic; Old Testament
- Days of the Arabs*, 393, 396; *see also* Arabic epic
- De Riquer, M., 294
- death: *see* themes of epic
- death and eroticism: *see* themes of epic
- Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*: *see Togail Bruidne Da Derga*
- Deuteronom(ist)ic writers, 96–7; *see also* Hebrew epic
- Deyermond, A., 315, 318
- Dhu'l Qarnayn, 213–14; *see also* Koran; Persian epic
- Dietrich Cycle*, 267; *see also* Germanic epic
- Digenis Akritas*, 225–6, 415
- Dingana, 382, 387; *see also* Nguni praise poetry; Shaka; Shaka praise poetry
- Diodorus Siculus, 337–8; *see also* Greek history
- Diu Klage*, 267–72, 417; *see also* Germanic epic; women in epic
- Diyāb, 405, 407
- Domitian, 189, 195–9, 415; *see also* Flavian period; Roman epic tradition; Roman history; Roman Imperial period
- Dorson, R., 86–9
- drama: African, 386, 388–9; drama vs. epic: *see* genre; drama vs. history: *see* genre; Hittite, 56, 70; Mayan, 362–80, 420; Roman, 169, 174–5; Spanish, 318, 362–80, 420
- Drout, M. C. D., 245
- Droysen, J. G., 123
- Dumézil, G., 104
- Dumville, D., 339
- Dundes, A., 86

- Eagle: *see* Kot; *see also* animal fables, symbolism, and metaphor
- Early Rus' principalities, 224–5, 235;
see also Slavic epic; Slavic history
- Ebla, 59, 66–8, 72–3, 412; *see also*
Hittite epic; Hittite history
- economic motif: *see* themes of epic
- Edda*, 265, 329, 332–5, 419; *see also* skaldic poetry; Snorri Sturluson
- Eddic poetry, 265, 329, 332–5, 341, 346, 349; *see* skaldic poetry
- Egypt, 8, 37–8, 54, 58, 66, 94–5, 124, 145, 212–13, 218–20, 256, 285, 374, 392, 397–403, 406–7, 412, 421
- Einhard: *see* *Life of Charlemagne*
- Ekur, 29–33
- Elam, 28, 58
- elegy vs. epic: *see* genre
- Elvira, 317–18; *see also* women in epic
- Enlil, 28–33, 54
- Enmerkar, 11–17; *see also* Enmerkar poems
- Enmerkar poems, 15–17; *Enmerkar and Ensuhkeshdana*, 11, 13–14; *Enmerkar and Lord of Aratta*, 11–17
- Ennius, Quintus, 168–70, 173, 176–8, 188–98; *see also* Roman epic tradition
- Ensuhekshdana, 11–14; *see also*
Enmerkar poems
- epic as genre: *see* genre
- epic motifs: *see* formulaic diction and motifs;
see also themes of epic
- Epic of 'Antar ibn Shaddād*, 397; *see also*
Arabic epic
- Epic of al-Zābir Baybars*, 397; *see also*
Arabic epic
- Epic of the Banī Hilāl*, 397–8, 421–2;
see also Arabic epic; Arabic history
- epic themes: *see* themes of epic
- epic vs. history, 2–4, 15, 31, 35, 43, 56–8, 60–1, 66–8, 70, 73, 79, 86–7, 99, 107, 112–13, 116–17, 123–4, 145–8, 150, 155, 157, 167–70, 176, 178, 185–9, 212–13, 220, 230, 234–7, 257, 262–5, 285, 293–300, 310, 328–30, 332–6, 340–2, 347, 351, 356, 381–2, 385–8, 393, 395–402, 406–8, 411–13, 422–3
- epic, function of, 42–3, 93, 99, 123, 130, 132, 223, 225–6, 229, 231–2, 234, 236, 264, 270, 290, 306, 329, 335, 347, 349, 354, 358, 385, 407; cathartic function, 270–2; civic function, 3–5, 20, 40–3, 51, 58, 73, 86, 89–91, 93, 96, 99–100, 104–5, 108, 112–14, 123, 129–34, 158–9, 169–78, 185–9, 193, 197–9, 224, 232–4, 244–6, 252, 257, 262–6, 270, 283, 296–8, 306, 310, 317–19, 335–7, 341, 347–51, 356, 373, 386, 405–8, 412; commemorative function, 1–2, 39, 42, 70, 100, 132, 157–8, 172–3, 185, 187–8, 191, 197, 293, 306, 363–4, 382, 386, 413; didactic function, 30, 42–3, 51, 66–85, 103, 108, 113–14, 150, 176–7, 186–97, 214, 220, 223, 263, 273, 306, 319, 373, 412; entertainment function, 42–3, 177, 192, 213–14, 251, 254, 262, 280, 298, 300, 305–6, 335, 412; etiological function, 330–1; group identity function, 5, 52, 59–60, 87–8, 99–100, 104–5, 110, 123, 130, 151–3, 158, 169–70, 177–8, 185–98, 213, 223, 228, 232–7, 252, 262–3, 270–2, 306, 332, 340, 347–57, 381–2, 407–8, 364–9, 378, 381, 386–8, 412–16, 419–20, 423; ideological function, 20–1, 43, 95, 108–9, 115, 169, 219, 224, 237, 244, 253, 298, 353, 356–8; political function, 5–20, 33, 36, 38, 40–3, 60, 68–73, 76, 90, 95–9, 103–9, 112–17, 127, 130–3, 146, 153, 155–60, 169–78, 185–9, 195–220, 228–30, 234–6, 244, 251–2, 263–6, 270–1, 281, 286–7, 297–300, 313, 319, 333, 337, 340, 349, 353–7, 386–9, 395, 402–8, 412–17, 420–3; religious function: *see* religious context
- epic, mythological vs. historical, 8, 17, 20–1, 51, 56–7, 66, 68–9, 71, 104, 112, 151, 153, 159, 168–9, 186–99, 212, 230–1, 245, 263–7, 414–15
- epic, narrative vs. romance, 212–13, 218–19, 232–3, 236, 265, 269–70, 284, 305–6, 310, 318, 404

- epic, oral vs. written, 1–4, 8, 10, 26, 30, 39–40, 57, 67–71, 76, 86, 89–93, 96, 103–5, 109–10, 114, 123–5, 130, 147, 157–60, 223–6, 230, 232–7, 258, 263–6, 271–2, 284, 288, 296, 300–4, 339–42, 357, 363, 370–1, 383–6, 392–8, 401–8, 411, 415–17, 420–2; *see also* oral tradition; tradition, oral vs. written; writing, significance of
- Epona: *see* Rhiannon
- Etzel: *see* Attila
- Eulalia of Mérida, 317–18; *see also* hagiographical literature; martyr literature; women in epic
- Eumelus of Corinth, 159–60; *see also* Greek epic
- Eunomia* (Tyrtæus), 145–50, 153–8; *see also* elegy vs. epic
- exploration of unknown: *see* themes of epic
- Faghfur, 216–17
- Fagrskinna*, 333; *see also* manuscript tradition
- Fates of the Apostles*, 255; *see also* Germanic epic
- Father Fox: *see* *Tata Yak*
- Fatimids, 398, 406
- Fenian Cycle*, 336; *see also* Irish epic; Scandinavian epic
- Ferdausi, *see* Ferdowsi
- Ferdowsi, 212–13, 215–20, 415; *see also* Persian history
- Fernando I., 310, 312, 315–16
- Fierabrás, 364, 375–8
- Finley, M. I., 126
- Finn mac Cumail, 336
- Flavian period: 191, 195, 415; *see also* Domitian; Roman Imperial period; Silius Italicus
- Foley, J., 91, 228
- folklore, 2, 8, 16, 19, 26, 33, 39, 51, 55, 67–72, 77–8, 86–9, 227, 231–3, 300, 304, 357, 375, 406–7, 412, 416, 423
- formulaic diction and motifs, 2–4, 14, 17, 26–7, 30–2, 34–42, 52, 54, 58, 67–72, 74, 77–9, 86, 89–90, 92, 100, 105, 109, 124–5, 128, 130, 147, 214, 225–6, 232–3, 244, 246, 248–52, 255, 271, 280, 284, 298, 300, 303–4, 311–15, 317, 319, 336, 338–49, 352–4, 394, 396, 402, 404–5, 371
- fornaldar sögur*, 329, 418–19; *see also* Scandinavian epic
- Foster, B. R., 43
- foundation legends, 20, 51, 57, 88, 90, 98, 114, 117, 145, 148, 151–9, 169, 176, 212, 223, 228, 328, 284, 330, 354, 387, 397, 419; *see also* mythology
- Foundation of Colophon and Migration to Elea in Italy* (Xenophanes), 145, 153–5
- “Fragment of the Hague,” 288, 294; *see also* *chansons de geste*
- Franks, 244, 281–2, 290, 294–5, 299–300, 328, 407, 422
- French epic, 5, 267, 280–3, 293–309, 311, 313, 317–19, 417
- French history, 285, 288, 293–5, 297–300, 306, 418; *see also* historiography, French
- Freyr, 332, 334
- Fulk, R. D., 251, 254
- Ganelon, 281, 313, 376–7
- Genealogies and Life of Kings: see* *Ættartala ok konunga ævi*
- Genesis, 257, 336; *see also* Bible; Hebrew epic; Old Testament
- genre: biography, 27, 44, 74, 77–8, 132, 159, 175, 212–13, 218–19, 229, 254, 280–1, 287, 289, 294, 303, 329–30, 333, 341, 348–9, 354–5, 357, 364, 395–7, 415, 420–1; content vs. function, 229; cross-genre influence, 7–8, 42, 55, 67, 70–1, 78, 104–5, 130, 145, 155, 169, 175, 185, 189–91, 220, 235–6, 246, 288, 298, 318–19, 339, 341, 350–1, 354–5, 395–6, 403, 406, 412, 414, 423; drama vs. epic, 169, 362–80, 373, 375–6, 420–1; drama vs. history, 169, 362–80, 386, 389, 420; elegy vs. epic, 145–66, 190, 414; epic as genre, 1, 4, 7–8, 11, 15, 42, 44, 51–2, 54–61, 71, 77–8, 86–7, 89–93, 96, 98–100, 103–5, 130, 145, 155, 169–70, 173–8, 185, 187–91, 198–9, 223, 228–9, 234–6, 243, 246, 252, 262–3, 269–72,

- 280, 288, 301, 310, 318–19, 338–9, 341–2, 350–1, 354–5, 395–6, 381, 403, 406, 411, 420–3; saga vs. epic, 26, 30, 35, 40–4, 87, 148, 262, 268, 271, 297, 329–46, 412, 418–19; *see also* prose vs. poetry
- George, A., 12
- Gephart, I., 271
- Germania, 243, 244, 249, 251, 257
- Germanic epic, 5, 243–61, 262–79, 318, 328–9, 416–17
- Germanic history, 244, 264–5, 270, 281–2, 285–6, 294–5, 331; *see also* historiography, Germanic
- Gesta Francorum*, 294; *see also* *chansons de geste*
- Gideon, 87–90, 97
- Gifts of Men*, 258; *see also* Germanic epic
- Gilan, A., 40–1
- Gilgamesh literature, 15, 17–21, 52, 57, 66, 77–8, 411; *Death of Gilgamesh*, 17–18, 77; *Gilgamesh and Akka*, 17–19; *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*, 17–19; *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*, 17–18; *Song of Gilgamesh*, 66; *Gilgamesh and Huwawa A*, 17–18; *Gilgamesh and Huwawa B*, 17–18; *see also* Mesopotamian epic; Sumerian epic
- Gilgamesh, 12–13, 15, 17–21, 52, 57, 66, 77–8, 411
- Girart de Roussillon*, 271, 283–4, 288; *see also* *chansons de geste*
- gods in epic, 9–10, 13–16, 27–9, 36, 54, 57, 69–70, 72, 87, 96–9, 108–13, 189–92, 195, 198, 214, 245, 249, 253–4, 267, 283, 299–303, 329, 331–2, 415
- Goldberg, S., 187–8, 197
- Gonzalo González, 311–12
- Goths, 247, 265, 290, 318
- Gottwald, N., 94
- Grant, E. W., 387
- Great Chronicle of Alfonso XI*, 313; *see also* Spanish epic; Spanish history
- Great Earth Trumpets*: *see* *Ni Ulew Tum*
- Greek epic, 5, 16–17, 51, 67, 76–9, 99, 122–45, 147, 149–61, 169–70, 174, 176–7, 185–95, 212–13, 244, 246–7, 251, 255, 272, 348–50, 370, 382, 392, 413–14; *see also* Hesiod; Homer; *Iliad*; *Odyssey*
- Greek history, 79, 123–4, 145, 147, 150, 155, 157, 159, 177, 337; *see also* historiography, Greek
- Greeks, 52, 66, 108–9, 122–44, 145–66, 169–70, 176–7, 185, 212, 217–18, 244, 246–7, 255, 283, 337, 382, 392
- Greenblatt, S., 130
- Greenstein, E., 91
- Grendel, 243, 246–50, 253; *see also* *Beowulf*
- Grethlein, J., 95
- Grintser, P., 109
- Guerra de Navarra*, 287; *see also* *chansons de geste*
- Guilhem Anelier of Toulouse, 287–8
- Guilhem de Tudela: *see* Guilhem Anelier of Toulouse
- Gunther, 266–71
- Gurparanzah king of Ailanuwa, 57
- guslar(i)*: *see* bardic culture
- Guti, 29, 33
- Gwebisa, 387–8
- Gyges of Lydia, 148, 150, 152
- Gylfaginning*, *see* *Edda*; *see also* skaldic poetry
- Hagen, 266–72
- hagiographical literature, 236, 317–19; *see also* martyr literature
- Hahhum, 34–5, 39, 52–3, 59, 68–9, 75
- Hákon Haraldsson, King of Norway, 333
- Hákonar saga góða*: 333; *see also* *Heimskringla*; Snorri Sturluson
- Hákonarmál* (Eyvindr Skáldaspillir), 333
- Hammurabi, 42, 53
- Hannibal, 192–5
- Haššu(wa), 52, 68–70, 75
- Háttatal*, 334; *see also* *Edda*; skaldic poetry; Snorri Sturluson
- Hattuša, 37, 51–8, 66–9, 74, 76
- Hattušili I, 34, 39, 52–4, 59–61, 68–70, 73–8
- Hattušili I's Testament*: *see* *Annals of Hattušili I*
- Haxa, 315, 317; *see also* women in epic

- Hebrew Bible, 86–102, 412–13, 416;
 see also Bible; Hebrew epic;
 Old Testament
- Hebrew epic, 86–102, 256, 257, 392,
 412–13; *see also* Bible; biblical history;
 Old Testament
- Heilagra manna sögur*, 329; *see also*
 Íslendinga sögur
- Heimskringla*, 333, 340; *see also* Edda;
 Eddic poetry; Snorri Sturluson
- Heliand*, 255; *see also* Germanic epic
- Hendel, R., 99
- Hercules, 96, 145, 150–2, 154–5, 159,
 170–1, 247
- hero, definition of: *see* themes of epic
- Herodotus, 69, 79, 123, 147, 150, 154–5,
 158–60, 218, 414; *see also* Greek history;
 historiography, Greek
- heroic code: *see* themes of epic
- Heroic Deeds of Mercurius of Smolensk*, 229;
 see also *Riazan' Cycle*; Slavic epic
- Hertel, D., 124
- Hesiod, 66–7, 71, 76–8, 122, 145, 158–9,
 412; *Catalogue of Women*, 145, 158–9;
 Works and Days, 67, 77, 78, 122; *see also*
 Greek epic
- Hildico: *see* Kriemhild
- Hiltebeitel, A., 110
- Hisarlik, 123–6, 413; *see also*
 Schliemann, H.; sources: archaeological;
 Trojan War
- Historia Brittonum*, 339; *see also*
 Scandinavian history
- Historia Danorum* (Saxo Grammaticus),
 265; *see also* Germanic epic
- Historia de Carlo Magno y los doce pares de*
 Francia: *see* Carlo Magno
- Historia de vita Caroli Magni et Rolandi*:
 see *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*; *see also*
 chansons de geste; *chanson de Roland*
- Historia destructionis Troiae* (Guido delle
 Colonne), 225
- Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*
 (Venerable Bede), 332
- historical epic, 12, 21, 26–49, 55–6,
 59–60, 66–8, 75, 77, 79, 87, 167–87,
 193, 196–9, 212, 234–6, 311, 336, 392,
 395–7, 414, 418–20
- historical memory, 1–4, 21, 33, 37, 39, 43,
 69–70, 99, 100, 107–8, 112–16,
 123–6, 132–3, 149, 155, 158, 168,
 176–7, 244, 264–5, 280, 281, 285,
 293–4, 298, 330, 332, 335, 341, 371,
 373, 378, 381–2, 394, 406, 408,
 413–14, 423
- historicity (of epic tradition), 3–5, 12, 87,
 124, 126–7, 130, 159, 220, 257, 328,
 351, 419, 420, 422; of Akkadian epic
 tradition, 31, 34, 35–43, 412; of Arabic
 epic tradition, 395–6, 421–2; of
 Aratta, 16, 412; of Banī Hilāl tradition,
 397–403, 421–2; of biblical tradition,
 86, 91–5, 99, 413; of *chansons de geste*,
 280–4, 286, 288, 293, 417–18;
 of Germanic epic tradition, 243–61,
 263–72, 416–17; of Greek epic tradition,
 3, 56, 122–6, 129–33, 147, 152, 413;
 of Hittite epic tradition, 59–60, 67–8,
 70, 72, 77–9; of Mayan epic tradition,
 362, 371–2, 375, 420; of Persian epic
 tradition, 212–13, 415; of Roland
 tradition, 295–6, 417; of Roman epic
 tradition, 167–9, 177, 188–90, 196–7;
 of Scandinavian epic tradition, 328,
 330–1, 337, 339–40, 342, 419; of Shaka
 praise poetry, 384–9, 420–1; of Slavic
 epic tradition, 226, 232–4, 415–16;
 of South Slavic epic tradition, 348–9,
 351, 353, 358; of South Asian epic
 tradition, 3, 100, 103, 106–9, 112,
 114–16, 413; of Spanish epic tradition,
 286, 288, 311, 375, 417, 420; of
 Sumerian epic tradition, 12, 19–21,
 411–12
- historiography, 168, 227, 232, 234–6, 332,
 349, 357, 424; biblical, 86, 99, 244, 336,
 364, 413; Carolingian, 280, 286, 287,
 288; French, 280, 286, 287, 288, 293–4,
 298; Germanic, 244, 264–5, 270,
 281–2, 285–6, 294–5, 331; Greek, 79,
 123, 145, 148, 151, 155, 158, 159;
 Hittite, 59, 66–8, 70, 73; Islamic, 400,
 406; Mesopotamian, 15, 31, 35, 43;
 Roman, 176, 178; Slavic, 232, 234–6;
 South Slavic, 349, 357, 420;
 Spanish, 287–8

- History of Kings of Persia*, 220; *see also*
 Persian epic; Persian history
 Hittite epic, 26, 40, 51–65, 66–85, 124–5,
 392, 412
 Hittite history, 39, 52–5, 59–60, 66–70,
 73, 75–8, 122; *see also* historiography,
 Hittite
 Hobsbawm, E., 87–8
 Homer, 2–5, 8, 12, 66, 71, 76–9, 89,
 122–44, 149, 152–3, 155, 158–60,
 167–70, 175–7, 193–4, 272, 342,
 348–50, 370, 413–14; *see also*
 Greek epic; *Iliad*; *Odyssey*
 Horrent, J., 299
 Hrafnkell, 332
Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða, 332; *see also*
fornaldar sögur
Hrólfs saga kraka: 329; *see also* *fornaldar*
sögur
 Hrothgar, King of the Danes, 243, 246–9,
 253, 257; *see also* *Beowulf*
 Huns, 265–7
Huon de Bordeaux, 304; *see also*
 French epic
 Hurrians, 35, 57–61, 66–72, 75, 79, 412
 Huso: *see* Isak
 Huwawa, 13, 18
 Hygelac, king of the Geats, 244, 247, 252,
 254, 416; *see also* *Beowulf*
 Hymes, D., 91
 Ibn Khaldūn, 398–403, 406–7, 421;
see also Arabic history; historiography,
 Islamic
 Ibro Bašić, 348, 349
 iconography: *see* symbolism, allegories,
 and iconography
Igor Tale, 226–9, 235–6, 415; *see also*
 Slavic epic
Iliad, 2–5, 56, 66–7, 78, 122–44,
 148–50, 168, 177, 193–4, 246, 250,
 258, 272, 350, 397, 412, 422; *see also*
 Homer
 Inan(n)a, 9–10, 13–16, 27, 29, 36; *see also*
 gods in epic; women in epic
 India, 2, 103, 105–9, 112–13, 115–17,
 217, 220; post-Vedic period, 103–4;
 Vedic period, 103–4, 107–8
Intoxication of the Ulstermen: *see* *Mesca*
Ulad; *see also* Irish epic; *Ulster Cycle*
Ionian History (Panyassis), 145, 154–5;
see also Greek history
 Iran, 13–15, 20, 115, 217–19, 212–13
 Iranian epic: *see* Persian epic
 Irish epic, 5, 334–9, 418–19; *see also*
 Scandinavian epic
 Iron Age, 95
 Isak, 348–9
 Ishtar, 27, 28, 54; *see also* gods in epic;
 women in epic
 Isin, 9–10, 17
 Iskandar, 212–13, 415
 Islam, 295–6, 281, 283–6, 348–56, 393,
 395–8, 401, 406–7, 421–2; *see also*
 religious context
Íslendinga sögur: 329–31, 341; *see also*
 Scandinavian epic
Íslendingabók: 330–1; *see also* Scandinavian
 epic
 Israel, 86–8, 90, 94–5, 98; *see also*
 Hebrew history
 Israelites, 86–100; *see also* Hebrew history
 Ivanovich, D., 228
 Ixoq Mun, 365, 369, 371
izibongo, 381, 420–1; *see also* African epic;
 Nguni praise poetry; praise poetry
 Jackson, W. T. H., 263
 Jaguar: *see* Balam; *see also* animal fables,
 symbolism, and metaphor
 Jainism, 108–9, 113
 Jakobson, R., 224–5
 Jami, 219–20
 Jehovah, 243, 245, 248, 253, 256; *see also*
 gods in epic; religious context
 Jephthah, 87–91, 97
 Jesus, 243, 248–9, 255, 300; *see also* Bible;
 religious context
 Jimena, Doña, 310, 312–17, 321–3; *see also*
 Spanish epic; women in epic
jongleur: *see* bardic culture
 Joshua, 93–8
 Julius Caesar, Gaius: *see* Caesar
 K'amol Be, 365–6
 K'iche' kingdom, 362, 364, 372, 375–6, 420

- K'iqab, 372, 375
 Karadžić, Vuk, 351, 357
 Kaweq K'eché Winaq, 365–72, 374–8
 Kaweq of the Forest People: *see* Kaweq K'eché Winaq
 kenning, 334, 341, 419; *see also*
 Eddic poetry
Kheradnâma, 219–20; *see also* Persian epic
Kiev Cycle, 230–1, 234; *see also* Slavic epic
 Kievan Rus': *see* Early Rus' principalities
 kingship: *see* themes of epic
 Kish, 9–10, 17–18, 27, 31–2
kisþum ceremonies, 37, 43; *see also* ancestor literature; religious context
Kitāb al-'Ibar, 398; *see also* Arabic epic
 Klæber, F., 253
 Koljević, Svetozar, 355
konunga sögur, 328; *see also* Scandinavian epic
 Koran, 213–14
 Korfmann, M., 124–5
Kosovo Cycle, 228, 416, 419–20; *see also* Slavic epic
 Kot, 365, 369, 371
 Kramer, S. N., 16
 Kriemhild, 265–8, 271, 418; *see also*
 Germanic epic; women in epic
Kulikovo Cycle, 228, 415; *see also* Slavic epic
 Kullman, W., 127
Kumarbi Cycle, 51, 57, 59–60, 66; *see also* Hittite epic
 Kurus, 106, 108–16, 413

 Lady Wife of Lord Five Thunder:
 see Xoqajaw
 Lambert of Ardres, 285
 Lambra, Doña, 310–20; *see also* Spanish epic; women in epic
Lament, The: see *Diu Klage*
Landnámabók, 330; *see also* Scandinavian epic
 Lane, E. W., 397
 Lara, Doña, 310–12, 316; *see also* Spanish epic; women in epic
 Larsa, 9–10
 Latacz, J., 124–7

Laxdæla saga, 330–1; *see also* Scandinavian epic
 Lazar, prince of Serbia, 228, 351, 416
Lebor Gabála Érenn, 336, 338; *see also* Scandinavian epic
 Lepidus, 172–3
Les Chétifs, 285–6; *see also* *chansons de geste*
Les Grandes Chroniques de France, 299–300, 306, 418; *see also* French history
Lex Burgundiorum, 265; *see also* Germanic literature
 libraries and archives, 1, 8–9, 23, 32–4, 37–40, 51–3, 57, 66–70, 150, 155, 159–60, 218–19, 229, 295, 383, 385
Life of Alexander Nevski, 229; *see also* *Riazan' Cycle*; Slavic epic
Life of Charlemagne (Einhard), 254, 281, 294, 341; *see also* Carolingian period; Charlemagne; genre, biography; Germanic history
 Linear B, 126–8, 246, 422
 Liuzza, R. M., 250–1
 Liverani, M., 32, 35, 38, 41
Lives of Saints, 329; *see also* Scandinavian epic
Lives of the Apostles, 329; *see also* Scandinavian epic
 Livius Andronicus, 169, 175, 176, 189
 Livy, 168, 172–3, 175–8, 414, 423; *see also* historiography, Roman; Roman history
 Lord Five Thunder, *see* Ajaw Job Toj
 Lord, A., 2, 92, 125, 311–12, 347–50, 393, 404–5, 423; *see also* formulaic diction and motifs
 Lothar, 284
 Louis, R., 288
 Lugal, A., 31
 Lugalbanda poems, 12–17; *Lugalbanda in the Wilderness*, 13; *The Return of Lugalbanda*, 13, 15
 Lugalbanda, 12–20
 Lydia, 148–9, 153–4

Mabinogi, 338–40; *see also* Scandinavian epic; Welsh epic
 Machinist, P., 99
 MacKay, A., 314

- Macpherson, J., 236
Madness of Sweeney: see Buile Suibne
 magic: *see* themes of epic, magic
 Magolwana, 382
 Mahmud of Ghazna, Sultan, 220
 Malcolm, D., 383
 Malkin, I., 52
 Mamai, 228, 229
 MaMhlalise Mkhwanazi, 382
Man of Rabinah: see Rabinah Achi
 Man Slave, Woman Slave: *see* Achi Mun
 Mandach, A., 296
 Manisi, D., 389
 Maništušu, 58
Manly Deeds: see Annals of Hattušili I
 manuscript tradition, 1, 4, 9–11, 17, 19,
 27–9, 35–40, 53, 57, 67, 91, 98–9,
 103–5, 110, 115, 225–9, 235, 255, 264,
 267–71, 280–6, 294–9, 305–6, 318,
 330, 333, 339, 363–4, 369–71, 383–5,
 396–7, 402–3, 408, 420
 Mari, 37–8, 43, 55
 Marius, Gaius, 167–8, 177
 Marko, prince of Serbia, 351, 354;
 Marko Drinks Wine at Ramadan, 351;
 Prince Marko and Musa the Beheader,
 351; *see also* Christian epic; Slavic epic
 Martin, R., 51–2, 104
 martyr literature, 317–19, 418; *see also*
 hagiographical literature; *Passio*
 Sanctorum Martyrum Facundi et
 Primitivi; Peristephanon (Aurelius
 Clemens Prudentius)
 Matija Murko, 347
 Mauryans, 108–9, 113–17, 413
 Mayan epic, 5, 362–80, 420; *see also*
 drama, Mayan
 medieval period, 212–22, 223–42,
 243–61, 262–79, 280–92, 293–309,
 310–27, 328–46, 395–6, 406, 408
 Mēgi: *see* Meki
 Meki, 59, 66, 67, 68, 73, 75
 memorization, 9, 10, 21, 92, 149, 363,
 369–73, 393, 398, 403–4
 Mendenhall, G., 94
 Mercian kings, 255–6
Mesca Ulad, 337; *see also* Irish epic;
 Ulster Cycle
 Mesopotamia, 7–25, 26–50, 52–3, 55, 57,
 61, 66–9, 77, 97, 106, 374, 392;
 Early Dynastic period, 8, 12, 16, 19–20;
 Middle Assyrian period, 69;
 Middle Babylonian period, 27–9, 34, 79;
 Neo-Assyrian period, 27–9, 39, 41, 44,
 80; Neo-Babylonian period, 27, 29,
 39–42; Old Akkadian period, 29, 31–6,
 40–1, 44, 53, 58; Old Assyrian period,
 27, 30, 34–6, 38–9, 41–4, 68;
 Old Babylonian period, 10, 17–20,
 27–9, 31–7, 39, 40–2, 53–5, 79;
 Ur III dynasty, 9–10, 13, 16–20, 29,
 33, 36–7
 Mesopotamian epic, 1, 5, 7–25, 26–50, 58,
 60, 67, 71, 74, 79, 122, 127, 392, 411–12;
 see also Akkadian epic; Sumerian epic
 Mesopotamian history, 15, 31, 35, 43;
 see also historiography, Mesopotamian
 meter: Arabic, 392–3, 396–7, 403, 405–6;
 chansons de geste, 290, 297, 301;
 Germanic, 244, 248–9, 252, 271, 297,
 301; Greek and Roman, 2, 122–5, 145,
 150–60, 167–78, 247, 414; hexameter,
 67, 76, 77, 122, 124–5, 145, 150, 153,
 154, 157–60, 167–70, 173, 176, 178,
 414; Mayan, 362, 364–6, 369–70;
 Saturnian, 170–6; skaldic, 341, 419;
 Slavic, 227, 230, 353; South Asian, 110,
 247; Spanish, 363–5
 methodology and theory, 4, 7, 21, 32,
 35–44, 51–2, 71, 86, 89–92, 94–5,
 99–100, 110, 122–3, 125–8, 130–2,
 151, 159, 169, 177, 225–8, 232–4, 244,
 246–52, 258, 263–4, 266, 280, 287–8,
 293, 295–6, 332–3, 385–6, 402–3,
 405; *see also* Lord, A.; Parry, M.
 Michalowski, P., 30, 36, 51
 Middle Ages: *see* medieval period
 military songs, Roman, 288–90, 417
 Miller, D., 5, 411–24
 Miller, V. F., 232
 Mimnermus, 145, 148–57; *Nanno*,
 149–50, 153, 155, 158; *Smyrneis*, 145,
 148–52, 155–7
Mocedades de Rodrigo: see Youthful Deeds
 of the Cid; see also chansons de geste;
 Cidian Cycle

- monsters: *see* themes of epic
- moralizing literature, 43, 71–2, 74, 77, 79, 153, 186–9, 191–5, 198, 231, 233, 299–300, 303, 305, 315, 332, 381, 388; *see also* epic, function of, didactic; wisdom literature
- Moros y cristianos*, 364; *see also* drama, Mayan
- Mort Aymeri de Narbonne*, 300–1, 306; *see also* *chansons de geste*
- Moses, 87, 249, 257
- Mother of Glistening Green: *see* Uchuch Q'uq'
- Mother of Quetzal Feathers: *see* Uchuch Q'uq'
- Mu'izz ibn Bādīs, 398–9, 408
- Mujo, 350
- Müller, J., 271–2
- Mummius, Lucius, 170–2
- Muršili I, 38, 53, 59, 68–9, 74–5
- Mūsā ibn Yahyā, 398–9, 408
- Mustajbey of the Lika, 350
- Mycenaean Age, 3, 5, 67, 76–7, 124–9, 132–3, 412–13
- Mynyddog Mwynfawr, lord of Din Eidyn, 339
- Mythological Cycle*, 230–4; *see also* *byliny*; *Kiev Cycle*; *Novgorod Cycle*
- mythological literature, 8, 20, 51, 56–7, 59–60, 66, 111, 151–2, 159, 185–95, 230–1, 245–6, 249, 329, 334–5, 342, 412, 418–19
- mythologized history, 33, 39, 55–8, 66–71, 76, 79, 112, 116–17, 127, 146–8, 154–5, 157–9, 167–8, 177–8, 189–94, 212, 245–6, 265–7, 328, 330, 414–20
- mythology: Egyptian, 212; Germanic, 249, 263–9, 271–3; Greek, 78, 146, 148, 151, 153–61, 153, 185–9, 192–4, 212; Hittite, 51, 56–8, 66, 71; Irish, 335–6, 338; Mesopotamian, 14, 17, 20–1; Persian, 212; Scandinavian, 245–6, 249, 330, 334–5, 341; Slavic, 230–1, 234; South Asian, 104, 111–13; Welsh, 338; *see also* foundation legends
- Naevius, Gnaeus, 169–77; *Bellum Punicum*, 170–7
- Nagy, G., 16, 92, 130, 133, 218, 247, 370
- Narām-Sîn literature, 28–43, 52–5, 58, 67–70; *Cuthean Legend of Narām-Sîn*, 67, 70; *Elegy on the Death of Narām-Sîn*, 28–9, 37; *Erra and Narām-Sîn*, 28–9; *Great Revolt against Narām-Sîn*, 29–32, 37–43, 53–4; *Gula-AN and the Seventeen Kings against Narām-Sîn*, 29, 31, 42, 53; *Narām-Sîn and the Enemy Hordes*, 29–30, 39–43; *Narām-Sîn and Lord of Apišal*, 28–9; *Tenth Battle*, 29, 32–3
- Narām-Sîn, 20, 28–43, 52–5, 58, 67–70
- Narrative of Pious Prince Dovmont and his Courage*, 229; *see also* *Riazan' Cycle*; Slavic epic
- narú*-genre literature, 30, 42; *see also* Hammurabi
- Nauta, R., 191
- Netherlands, 243, 252
- Neumann, G., 56
- New Testament, 254, 255; *see also* Bible; Old Testament; religious context
- Newman, J. K., 265
- Nguni praise poetry, 381–91
- Ni Ulew Tum*, 364; *see also* Mayan epic
- Nibelungen scriptorium*, 264; *see also* Germanic epic
- Nibelungenlied*, 262–79, 328, 416–18; *see also* Germanic epic
- Nichols, S. G., 297
- Nineveh, 39, 59, 72
- Ninsumuna, 12–13, 20; *see also* gods in epic; women in epic
- Nippur, 9–10, 13, 17–18, 28, 32, 36, 42
- Njals Saga*, 271, 331–2; *see also* Scandinavian epic
- Noah, 256, 257
- Noth, M., 94
- Novgorod Cycle*, 230–1; *see also* *byliny*; *Kiev Cycle*; *Mythological Cycle*
- Novgorod, 224, 226–7
- Nunnu, 75
- Nūr-Dagan, 34, 53
- Nurdahhi, 54
- Nyengana*, 382

- Odin, 245–6, 249, 329, 333; *see also* gods
in epic
Óðinn: *see* Odin
Odyssey, 2–3, 77, 122–3, 126–7, 130, 153,
175–7, 352, 405; *see also* Greek epic;
Homer
Old Testament, 243, 257, 416; *see also*
Bible; Hebrew epic
Oliveros, 376–8
oral tradition, 1–4, 10, 16, 26, 30, 33–44,
69–72, 76–8, 86, 89–93, 96, 103–10,
114, 122, 124–8, 132, 147–51, 155,
158, 160, 213, 223–31, 234, 237, 244,
252, 262–6, 272, 280, 284, 288, 294,
296, 300–5, 311, 314–15, 333, 335,
339, 342, 247–61, 381–5, 388, 392–7,
400–2, 405–6, 412–21; *see also*
Parry, M.; epic, oral vs. written
Orlando furioso, 297; *see also* *chansons de*
geste; Roland tradition
Orlando innamorato, 297; *see also* *chansons*
de geste; Roland tradition
Oswold, 255; *see also* Germanic epic
Ottoman Empire, 349–51, 355, 357
Oxford *Roland*: *see* *Roland* codex
- Palace Chronicles*, 73, 75, 78; *see also*
Hittite epic; Hittite history
Pañcālas, 106–12
Pāṇḍava(s), 110–17
Paris, G., 294
Parpola, A., 112, 115–16
Parry, M., 1–3, 92, 122, 255, 312, 347–50,
393, 404–5, 424; *see also* formulaic
diction and motifs; Lord, A.;
oral tradition
Passio Sanctorum Martyrum Facundi et
Primitivi, 318, 324–5; *see also*
hagiographical literature;
martyr literature; *Peristephanon*
(Aurelius Clemens Prudentius)
patronage: 73, 78, 177, 220, 264, 281,
285, 287, 294–300, 319, 369, 417;
see also aristocratic literature
Pérez, M., 370
performance context, 1, 8–11, 37, 40–3,
51–2, 55–60, 67–70, 76, 89–91,
103–6, 125, 130, 157–8, 169, 223, 280,
285, 293–4, 303–6, 314–19, 340,
350–8, 392, 394, 397, 403–8, 362–71,
374, 378, 381–2, 386–8, 411–14,
417–22; *see also* bardic culture; drama;
religious context
Peristephanon (Aurelius Clemens
Prudentius), 317–18; *see also*
hagiographical literature; martyr
literature; *Passio Sanctorum Martyrum*
Facundi et Primitivi
Persian epic, 5, 212–22, 392, 415
Persian history, 212–13, 218, 220; *see also*
historiography, Persian
Philistine(s), 88, 95
Phillpotts, B. S., 245
Piamonte, N., 364
Pidal, R. M., 294
Pindar, 155–7
Plataea Elegy (Simonides of Ceos), 145,
152, 154–5
Plutarch, 288–9; *see also* Greek history;
Roman history
Poema de mio Cid: *see* *Cantar de mio Cid*;
chansons de geste
Polak, F., 91–2
political context: *see* epic, functions of,
political; *see also* aristocratic literature;
propaganda
Polovtsians, 226–8
Polybius, 168, 175; *see also* Roman history
Popol Wuj, 364; *see also* drama, Mayan
Porcius Cato, Marcus: *see* Cato the Elder
postula sögur: *see* *Lives of the Apostles*
Potts, T., 32, 43
praise poetry, 10–11, 28–9, 37–40, 51–2,
55, 60, 68, 104, 155, 157, 167–78,
187–8, 212, 214, 220, 226, 229, 231–3,
236, 246, 290, 306, 339, 341, 350,
381–91, 419; *see also* aristocratic
literature; epic, function of, political;
patronage; propaganda
pre-Islamic period, 293, 396, 397, 421
present projected onto past, 2–3, 5, 16, 33,
39–42, 69–73, 76, 107–9, 115–17,
123, 127–9, 146, 148, 155–60, 169,
177–8, 185–9, 195–6, 220, 229, 230,
236–7, 257, 262, 264, 284, 286, 293,
297, 355, 387–8, 412–13, 420, 423

- Primat, 298, 299
Prise d'Orange, 283, 303; *see also* *chansons de geste*
 Prithu, 113; *see also* gods in epic
 propaganda, 33, 36, 43, 68–73, 76, 115–16, 169–78, 188, 196–8, 220, 229–30, 234, 236, 286, 298, 357, 386–7, 412–17, 420–3; *see also* epic, function of, political; praise poetry
 prose vs. poetry, 1, 89–92, 147, 154–7, 159–60, 172–3, 177, 214, 227–8, 235, 248, 250, 267, 294, 297–8, 306, 311, 329–30, 333–5, 340–2, 364, 369–70, 385, 391–6, 399–402, 414, 418–22; *see also* genre, saga vs. epic
Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle, 297–300; *see also* Roland tradition
Pubanu Chronicle, 70–1; *see also* Hittite epic; Hittite history
 Punic Wars, 170, 173, 175, 176, 189–97; *see also* Ennius; epic vs. history; historiography, Roman; Naevius; Roman history; Scipio Africanus; Silius Italicus
Punica: *see* Silius Italicus
 Puruṣhanda: 28, 34, 35, 38–9, 45, 53–4, 60, 68

Qissas al anbiyāʾ, 214; *see also* Arabic epic
 Quint, D., 17

Rabinal Achi, 362, 364–78, 420
 Rabinal, 362, 365–6, 369–78, 420
 Ragnarök, 104, 245
Ragnars saga loðbrókar, 331; *see also* Scandinavian epic
 Rāma Jāmadagnya, 116–17
 reception: *see* cross-cultural context
 Regillus, 172–3
 religious context, 2, 5, 33, 37–8, 43, 51, 55–60, 66, 96–8, 104–7, 108, 113–16, 130, 132–3, 150–1, 153, 155, 170–3, 214, 218, 224, 227–36, 243–5, 248–58, 263, 271, 281–4, 287, 295, 300, 306, 315, 319, 330–7, 340–1, 349–54, 363–9, 373–8, 387, 395–7, 400, 407, 412–13, 416–23
 Rhiannon, 338
Riazan' Cycle, 229

Rigveda, 105–8, 246–7, 250; *see also* South Asian epic; Vedic tradition
 Road Guide: *see* K'amol Be
 Roberts, M. J., 318
 Robinson, F. C., 252–4, 258
 Rodrigo of Vivar, 286, 310–12, 315–17, 417
Roland codex, 294–9, 302, 305–6
 Roland, 280–2, 288, 294–306, 310–11, 417
 Roldán, 310–13, 377
Roman des rois, 298–9
 Roman epic tradition, 5, 167–84, 185–211, 392, 414
 Roman history, 150, 168–9, 173–8, 337, 414; *see also* historiography, Roman
 Roman Imperial period, 150, 185–211, 414–15
 Roman Republican period, 167–84, 185–9, 195–8, 414
Romance de Doña Alda, 323–5; *see also* Spanish epic; women in epic
 Romans, 167–84, 244, 265, 288–90, 185–211, 265, 348, 337, 357, 392
 romantic encounters: *see* themes of epic
 Roncevalles: *see* Roncevaux
 Roncevaux, 281, 296–9, 302, 306, 374, 377
 Roshanak, 218–19; *see also* Alexander the Great; Persian epic; women in epic
 Rozaballes, 281
 Rubio, G., 13, 19
 Rus', 224–7, 235–6
Russian Primary Chronicle, 226; *see also* Slavic history
 Ruy Velázquez, 310–12, 316

Sack of Sardis (Callinus), 145, 152, 156–8; *see also* Greek epic
Sack of Troy (Sacadas of Argos), 152–3; *see also* Greek epic
Saga of Hákon the Good: *see* *Hákonar saga góða*
Saga of Hrafnkell, Priest of Freyr: *see* *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoda*
 saga vs. epic: *see* genre, saga vs. epic; *see also* prose vs. poetry
 Saladin, 407

- Salvas, 106, 115
 Samsī-Addu, 34, 37–8, 41–2
 Samson, 87–91, 95–6
 Samuel, 88–90
Sancho II, 310–13, 316, 320–1; *see also*
 Spanish epic
Saqi K'oxol, 364, 373
 Sargon the Great, 8–9, 26–44, 52–5,
 58–60, 67–9, 412
 Sargon literature, 27–44, 52–60, 67–9;
 I, Sargon, 27–8; *Nippur Letter*, 28, 42;
 Res Gestae Sargonis, 27–8; *Sargon Birth*
 Legend, 27–8, 39–40; *Sargon, the*
 Conquering Hero, 27–8; *Sargon in*
 Foreign Lands, 28; *Sargon Geography*, 40;
 Sargon, King of Battle, 28, 31, 34–9,
 53–4, 58–60; *Sargon, the Lion*, 28;
 Sumerian Sargon Legend, 27–8, 40–2;
 Ur Letter, 28, 35; *Wisdom of Sargon*,
 27–8, 39
 Sargonic kings, 8, 26–8, 35, 43, 53–8,
 68–9, 412
 Sasanian dynasty, 212, 217–18
 Saturnian meter: *see* meter, Saturnian
 Saul, 87–8
 Scandinavian epic, 5, 271, 328–46
 Scandinavian history, 244, 321, 329,
 331–7, 339, 341
Scéla Mucce Meic Da Thó, 337
 Schliemann, H., 123–4, 342
 Scipio Africanus, 193–7, 414–15
 Scipio epitaphs, 171–4; *see also* meter,
 Saturnian
 scribal culture, 1–2, 8–10, 12, 16, 17, 18,
 19, 21, 30, 34–8, 40–4, 52–5, 58–60,
 67, 92–3, 115, 258, 282, 294, 300–1,
 364, 369–71
Séquence de Sainte Eulalie, 317; *see also*
 French epic
 Serbia, 225, 228, 232, 236–7, 351, 357
 Serbo-Croatian epic tradition: *see* South
 Slavic epic
Seven Young Men of Lara, 310–12, 316,
 319–20; *see also* Spanish epic; women in
 epic
Shahnama, 212–13, 215–20, 415; *see also*
 Persian epic
 Shaka praise poetry, 383–9
 Shaka, 382–9, 420–1
 Shryock, A., 393
 Shulgi, 10–11, 20
Siege of Urshu, 60, 70–1, 75; *see also*
 Hittite epic
 Siegfried, 266–72
Siete infantes de Lara: *see* *Seven Young Men*
 of Lara
 Sigi, 329
 Sigmund, 246
 Sigurd, 246, 249
 Silius Italicus, 185–211, 414–15
 Simurru, 27–30, 35
 Sippar, 9–10, 17, 53
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, 267, 328
sīra, 395–7
Sīrat Banī Hilāl: *see* *Epic of the Banī Hilāl*
 Sisam, K., 257–8
 skaldic poetry, 265, 329, 332–5, 340–2,
 346, 249, 419; *see also* *Edda*;
 Eddic poetry; Snorri Sturluson
Skáldskaparmál, 334; *see also* *Edda*;
 Scandinavian epic; skaldic poetry
 Slavic epic, 5, 223–42, 415–16, 419–20
 Slavic history, 226–30, 232–6, 239, 420;
 see also historiography, Slavic
Slovo o Polku Igoreve: *see* *Igor Tale*
 Smith, M., 98–9
 Smyrna, 148, 150
 Snorri Sturluson, 257, 333, 340–2, 419;
 see also *Edda*; Eddic poetry; skaldic poetry
 social bandit, 87–8
 Sofonii of Riazan, 228–9
 Solomon, 214–17
Song of Deborah, 87, 92, 96; *see also*
 Hebrew Bible; Hebrew epic;
 women in epic
Song of Kumarbi: *see* *Kumarbi Cycle*
Song of Release, 51, 58–9, 66–76; *see also*
 Hittite epic
Song of Roland: *see* *Chanson de Roland*
Song of the Sea, 60; *see also* Hittite epic;
 Kumarbi Cycle
 sources: archaeological and epigraphical,
 32–41, 53–8, 67–9, 94–5, 109, 122–6,
 128–9, 131–2, 170–5, 237, 265, 281,
 337–8, 356, 363, 367, 375, 383–5, 413,
 422–3; archival and documentary, 32–7,

- sources: archaeological and epigraphical
 (*cont'd*)
 134–25, 148, 155, 227, 232, 244, 252,
 258, 265, 288, 295, 298, 302–3, 362,
 371, 385, 394–8, 408, 412; historical vs.
 literary, 4, 7, 12, 31–6, 40–1, 54, 69, 91,
 98, 122–4, 129, 134, 146–9, 153, 155,
 169, 170–6, 214, 236, 244, 263–4, 268,
 281, 287, 293, 295–7, 301–2, 333–5,
 340, 347, 351, 364, 375, 385, 398, 400,
 402, 408, 412, 417; *see also* libraries and
 archives
- South Asian epic, 103–21, 244, 246, 412–13
- South Slavic epic, 5, 232, 347–61, 404,
 406, 419–20
- South Slavic history, 347, 349, 351, 355–8;
see also historiography, South Slavic
- Sowayan, S., 393–5
- Spanish epic, 5, 281–3, 310–27, 363–4,
 417–20
- Spanish history, 287, 311, 313, 364; *see also*
 historiography, Spanish
- Sparta, 146–8, 155
- Spiegel, G., 296–8
- Stager, L., 95
- Starke, F., 56
- Stories of the Prophets: see Qissas al anbiyá'*
- Story of Mac Da Thó's Pig: see Scéla Mucce
 Meic Da Thó*
- Stuart, J., 383–5
- Sulejman (the Magnificent), 349, 355, 419
- Sumer, 1, 7–25, 29–33, 392
- Sumerian epic, 1, 5, 7–25, 26, 27, 29, 37,
 40–2, 44, 77, 392, 411–12; *see also*
 Mesopotamian epic
- Summary of the Sagas of the Kings of Norway:*
see Ágrip af Nóreg's konunga sogum
- Sunni commentaries, 214; *see also* Koran
- Susa, 9–10, 17
- sūtas, 105
- Sviatoslav Vsevolodich, Grand Prince of
 Kiev, 227–8
- Sybil's Prophecy: see Völuspá*
- symbolism, allegories, and iconography,
 13–15, 37, 71, 75–6, 87, 111–12,
 115–16, 131, 167, 232, 234, 264, 314,
 318, 341, 351, 355, 367–8, 372–3, 407,
 418, 421
- sympotic culture, 149–50, 154, 157–61;
see also compositional context;
 performance context
- ta'rikkh*, 395; *see also* Arabic history
- Tacitus, 173, 186–7, 249; *see also*
 historiography, Roman; Roman history
- Tafsir-e Surábádi: see* Sunni commentaries
- Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 335–8
- Tale about the Ruin of the Russian Land*,
 229; *see also* Slavic epic
- Tale of Igor's Campaign: see* *Igor Tale*
- Tale of Orašac*, 350–1; *see also* South Slavic
 epic
- Tale of the Battle Against Mamai*, 228, 229;
see also Slavic epic
- Talhadum, 34
- Tata Yak*, 372
- Teššub, 51, 57–60, 67, 72–3; *see also* gods
 in epic
- themes of epic: 5, 416; civil war, 88–9, 99,
 112, 287, 406; conquest and cultural
 superiority, 14–17, 27, 37, 69–70, 76,
 88, 99, 104, 108, 111–15, 130–1, 146,
 192–3, 198, 220, 232–3, 268–71, 282,
 295, 340, 354, 364–5, 383, 387, 397–8,
 402, 412, 416, 419; death, 18, 88–9,
 213–20, 230, 243–5, 266–7, 271–2,
 282, 296, 299, 305, 333, 351, 378, 415;
 death and eroticism, 88–9, 315–16, 319,
 415, 418; economic motif, 40–1;
 exploration of unknown, 27, 35, 54, 69,
 87, 230, 412; gods: *see* gods in epic; hero,
 definition of, 2–4, 12, 15, 54, 86–8, 96,
 98, 104–5, 110–13, 127, 230, 243–4,
 262–3, 266–8, 335, 349, 375, 397,
 407–8, 413, 417, 421–2; heroic code,
 43, 88, 264, 270–2, 296, 339–40, 351,
 354, 413; magic, 14, 16, 71, 116,
 266–71, 329–38, 419; kingship, 12–15,
 19–21, 26, 40–3, 51–8, 60, 87–90,
 97–9, 105, 110–16, 127–9, 130–1,
 185, 195, 212–14, 217–20, 263,
 297–300, 328–9, 331–7, 340–1, 372,
 375, 412–13; monsters, 16, 57–8, 111,
 231, 243–7, 250–2, 263, 266, 270,
 328–9; romantic encounters, 12, 19,
 88–9, 263, 313–19; vengeance, 87–9,

- 167, 243, 245, 254–5, 283, 285, 263,
266–7, 269–73, 311–18, 331–2, 418;
women: *see* women in epic
Thidrekssaga, 268; *see also* Germanic epic
Thomas, 255
Thousand and One Nights, 73
Thucydides, 69, 123, 150, 159; *see also*
historiography, Greek; Greek history
Tinney, S., 32, 40–1
Titus Livius: *see* Livy
Togail Bruidne Da Derga, 335; *see also*
Irish epic
Tolkien, J. R. R., 244–6, 250–2, 257–8,
272, 416
Torhtmund, 254–5
tradition, development of, 5, 13, 18–21,
30–40, 42–4, 53, 67–70, 76–8, 86,
91–8, 103–12, 117, 124–31, 147–50,
155–60, 164, 185, 224, 251, 268,
281–2, 288, 293–6, 341, 364–5,
370–1, 403, 412; native vs. imported,
51–65, 170–1, 175, 185–211, 251, 254,
336, 349, 363–9, 373–8, 396–400,
403, 408, 412–15, 419; oral vs. written,
1–4, 26, 30, 39–40, 57, 67–71, 76, 86,
89–93, 96, 103–5, 109–10, 114,
123–5, 130, 147, 157–60, 223–6, 230,
232–7, 258, 263–6, 271–2, 284, 288,
296, 300–4, 339–42, 357, 363, 370–1,
383–6, 392–8, 401–8, 411, 415–17,
420–2; variant traditions, 18–21, 52–8,
68, 72, 78, 93–8, 107–9, 116, 148–50,
159–60, 212, 244–8, 285, 288,
297–300, 306, 311, 338, 396, 407–8,
415
translation and adaptation, 52–60, 66–71,
74, 175–6, 213, 224–6, 236, 245, 272,
281–5, 294–8, 306, 310–11, 317,
337–8, 364, 373–4, 383, 415, 420
Trojan War, 12, 21, 35, 56, 78–9, 122–44,
152–5, 183, 225, 413
Trumpets of the Prisoner of War: *see* *Tum*
Teleche
truth, epic vs. historical, 16, 41, 159,
167–8, 178–9, 228, 251, 298–306,
331–3, 340, 347–51, 353–8, 385,
388, 392–6, 399–402, 408, 411,
418–22
Tum Teleche, 364; *see also* drama,
Mayan
Turolde, archbishop, 295
Turpin, archbishop, 295–9
Uchuch Q'uq', 365–6, 369, 371,
377–8
Uchuch Raxon: *see* Uchuch Q'uq'
Ulster Cycle, 336–8; *see also* Irish epic
Unnr, 330–1; *see also* women in epic
Unur: *see* Aud
Ur, 9–11, 13, 16, 18–21, 28–9, 31, 34,
36, 412–13, 416
Ur-Namma, 11, 20, 21
Urraca, Doña, 310–17, 320–1; *see also*
Spanish epic; women in epic
Urshu, 68–71
Uruk, 8–10, 12–19, 27, 31–2, 411
Vail, L., 386–7
variant traditions: *see* tradition, variant
Vedic Tradition, 103–7, 110–13, 115;
see also South Asian epic
Vellido, A., 313
Vengeance: *see* themes of epic
Vermeule, E., 89
Vikings, 251, 258, 331, 334, 341, 419
Virgil, Vergil, *see* *Aeneid*
Volksbücher, 267; *see also* Germanic epic
Völsunga saga, 329; *see also* *fornaldar sögur*,
Scandinavian epic
Völuspá, 245, 249–50, 332; *see also*
Scandinavian epic
Votadini, 339
Vṛtra, 111–13
Vujnović, N., 348–9
Walpole, R., 296
Watkins, C., 56, 244, 246, 250
Wealththeow, Queen of Denmark, 243, 247;
see also women in epic
Welsh epic, 5, 338–40, 418–19; *see also*
Scandinavian epic
Westenholz, A., 32, 34
White Flint: *see* *Saqi K'oxol*
White, H., 264
White, L., 386–7
Whitelam, K., 95

- Widsith*, 247; *see also* Germanic epic
Wife of Bath's Tale, 328; *see also* Germanic epic
 Wiglaf, 243, 252
 Wikander, 104
 Wilcke, C., 19
 William of Orange, 293, 303
 William of Toulouse, 282–3
 Wiluša, 56–7
Wilušiad, 56–7
 wisdom literature, 11, 27, 39, 43, 51, 59, 66–85, 98
 Witzel, M., 105, 107, 108, 111–16
 Woden, 245–7, 256; *see also* gods in epic
 Wolfger von Erla, Bishop of Passau, 264
 women in epic, 14, 29, 55–9, 69–77, 87–9, 92, 96–8, 112, 116, 145, 150–2, 158–9, 193, 218–19, 224, 227, 231, 243–50, 253, 256, 263–71, 283, 286, 305, 310–27, 330–1, 338, 351–4, 365, 369, 371, 377–8, 398, 407–8, 418
 Wright, G. E., 94
 writing, significance of, 2, 8, 9–10, 15, 30–1, 39, 67, 69, 76, 92, 109–10, 176, 223, 226, 296, 303–4, 364, 369–71, 395–6, 418–20; *see also* epic, oral vs. written
 Wylie, D., 383–5
wyrd, 245
Xajoj Tun: see Rabinal Achi
 Xhosa poetry, 388
 Xoqajaw, 365–6; *see also* women in epic
Ŷ Gododdin, 339–40; *see also* Welsh epic
 Yali-Manisi, D., 388
 Yamhad, 53
 Yhwh, 96–7; *see also* gods in epic
Youthful Deeds of the Cid, 310–11, 321–3; *see also chansons de geste; Cidian Cycle; Spanish epic*
 Yugoslavia, 2, 347, 350, 404
Zadonschina, 227–9, 235; *see also* Slavic epic
 Zalpa(r), 69–70
 Zazalla, 59, 66–8, 73–5
 Zulu praise poetry, 381–3, 385